

A MISSIONAL NEW MEMBER CURRICULUM:  
A LAUNCH INTO DISCIPLESHIP

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis-project studies the impact of a new member orientation built on missional discipleship. Most congregations do not recognize disciple-making as their primary role. How can a congregation reclaim its rightful place of disciple-making in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? It is the contention of this project that a congregation will rediscover her purpose to equip and multiply disciples by first realigning with God's missional character. To that end, this project will focus on creating an intentional and relational new member orientation that serves as a launch into a life of discipleship.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE PROBLEM AND ITS SETTING

In his 1992 article entitled *The End of the Home Field Advantage*, missiologist George Hunter reflected on the changing relationship between the church and post-modern world. Hunter claimed a privileged Christendom had ended, and churches could no longer count on being the “home team” that everyone loves.<sup>1</sup> Over these last twenty-five years, Hunter’s claims have proven true as year after year, the percentage of population practicing their faith within the local church declines. The “Come to us” era, enjoyed by the Western church for so long, is no longer. The church has experienced significant decline and diminished influence in communities across America for the last sixty years.<sup>2</sup>

The reasons for the church’s decline and loss of influence are complex. In Christendom, the church held a prominent place in the community, and was well positioned to exercise influence. Alvin Schmidt, author of *How Christianity Changed the World*, considers the positive influence Christianity once had on Western Civilization. In matters of government, economics, fine arts, education, and sciences, the Christian faith contributed enormously to the flourishing of mankind.<sup>3</sup> By the 1960s, Christianity was firmly rooted in western culture and church membership was considered a staple of

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1. George Hunter, “The End of the Home Field Advantage,” *Epworth Review* (May 1992): 69-76.

2. Tobin Grant, “The Great Decline: 60 Years of Religion in One Graph,” *Religious News Service*, January 27, 2014, accessed October 24, 2019, <https://religionnews.com/2014/01/27/great-decline-religion-united-states-one-graph/>.

3. Alvin Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 12.

community life.<sup>4</sup> In retrospect, historians note three events that reveal the pinnacle of Christian influence on American culture. On June 6, 1946, a parade to mark the 117<sup>th</sup> anniversary of children's Sunday school was held at Prospect Park in Brooklyn, NY, with 90,000 public school children in attendance.<sup>5</sup> In 1953, President Dwight Eisenhower held an inaugural prayer breakfast at the Conrad Hilton's Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C., with prayer offered in "in Jesus's name." And finally, in 1957, the phrase "*In God We Trust*" was printed on American paper currency. These three events, while not exhaustive, point to a time when Christianity was widely embraced in circles of influence and America was known as a "Christian nation."

With the rise to prominence, the focus of the western church began to shift. Assuming that the majority of the population was already Christian, engaging non-Christians with the good news of the gospel received less emphasis. During this time, many western congregations built impressive, orderly institutions where members gathered to learn all about God, but often stopped short of helping people take their knowledge into the world in order to draw others to Christ. Instead of equipping members to reach the un-churched in local communities, building the church as an institution took precedence, and with it a strong emphasis was placed on denominational beliefs and differences. Over time, the church pulled away from the local culture, as the church's relationship to the community became one of several worthy programs. Congregations organized and launched mission trips to reach other nations with the Gospel message, while steadily becoming out of touch with the local communities the church was called to

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4. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2000), 65.

5. James M. Singleton, Jr., Th.D., "Developing a Theology of the Local Church" (lecture, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, South Hamilton, MA, January 7, 2014).

serve at home.

With disengagement came loss of influence, and by the mid 1960s, congregations across America began to experience negative trends in membership and weekly worship attendance. As a response to the church's decline and loss of influence, a new movement emerged called the Church Growth Movement. Most historians credit missiologist Donald McGavran as the one who helped shape the church's early thinking regarding church growth. McGavran, a child of missionaries to India and later a missionary himself, was founding Dean and Professor of Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary's School of World Mission. Throughout his ministry, McGavran observed both the underlying causes and barriers to reaching large groups of people for Christ. In his book, *Understanding Church Growth*, McGavran challenged the church to use business marketing strategies to win the affections of a growing secular culture. He wrote, "Church Growth is an enterprise devoted to proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ and to persuading men to become disciples and dependable members of His Church."<sup>6</sup> His writing influenced the use of a corporate mindset and methodology to solve the church's stagnant "performance." By the 1980s, The Church Growth Movement was in full swing.<sup>7</sup>

Specifically aiming to reach the un-churched population and bring the local church back into a place of relevance, churches made great efforts to create an environment and worship experience that would encourage outsiders to feel welcomed. The intentional focus of drawing people to church became known as the "attractional church" or "seeker sensitive" model within the Church Growth Movement. During this

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6. Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), 83.

7. Peter C. Wagner, *Leading Your Church to Growth* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1984), 43.



period, the attractional church focused on developing programs in order to draw an otherwise disinterested community inside church walls. Some churches adopted the ministry model offered by Lyle Schaller in his book, *The Seven-Day-a-Week Church*. Schaller advocated church growth that was based on seven-day-a-week programming was necessary due to the “competition” between churches that developed during the Church Growth Movement.<sup>8</sup> “In simple terms,” writes Schaller, “the principal entry point for prospective future members in large churches has moved from Sunday morning to seven mornings, seven afternoons, and seven evenings every week.”<sup>9</sup> An increase in program development often required the need for additional staff. Dedicated areas for hospitality and children’s wings were built, and a renewed emphasis was placed on maintaining attractive facilities and grounds.<sup>10</sup> Following a corporate mentality, growing congregations separated core ministries of the church into departments. Compartmentalizing ministries such as Christian education, mission, and evangelism, left members ill-equipped to integrate their faith and life, and further isolated the gospel from a growing secular society.

With a focus toward measurable results, worship attendance, membership growth and contribution income became the three main metrics used to assess church health in the Church Growth Movement. Lay leadership, historically called to oversee the spiritual health of a congregation, took on the role of a corporate board of directors, ensuring the effectiveness of the organization. Sunday bulletins and newsletters reported prior week’s

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8. Lyle E. Schaller, *The Seven-Day-a-Week Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992), 22.

9. Schaller, *The Seven-Day-a-Week Church*, 50.

10. Herb Miller, *How to Build a Magnetic Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1987), 64.

worship attendance and contributions relative to the budget. This numerical focus helped to foster the assumption that the chief mission of the church was to increase membership, and the primary task of a member was to attend worship and give generously.<sup>11</sup> However, with the focus to grow membership, the core of the gospel message and call for self-sacrificing change were often diminished. Assimilating new members into membership became “club-like,” connecting people to programs and services provided by the church. Worship, programs, and other attractional forms of ministry routinely took precedence over developing disciples in authentic community. Instead of gathering for the purpose of being sent to engage the culture with the good news of the gospel, the “seeker sensitive” model of ministry unintentionally brought the message that coming to church was about getting “personal needs” met. American consumerism, and its unrelenting focus on the individual, began to take root inside church walls.

Instead of seeking a community to learn and live out the gospel, the attractional church cultivated an atmosphere of church “shopping,” where prospective members sought out a church that met their needs or expressed their identity. This, in turn, drove church leaders to differentiate their church by providing more programs and services to meet the perceived demand, creating a vicious cycle. As the church adopted many of the structures and forms of American culture, a member became a religious consumer.<sup>12</sup>

Kevin Ford, author of *Transforming Church*, writes, “In the Consumer church, the justification for primarily, or even exclusively, focusing on meeting the needs of the individual is that it will attract people to the church. In some cases, the hope is that those

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11. Michael Frost, *The Road to Missional: Journey to the Center of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2011), 63.

12. Frost, *The Road to Missional*, 69.

people will then hear the gospel and eventually be transformed.”<sup>13</sup> However, as Ford further writes, “individualism, particularly manifested in consumerism, forms the antithesis of community.”<sup>14</sup> Instead of fostering community where close relationships are formed in accountability, the Church Growth Movement promoted individualism and an understanding that faith in Christ is a personal issue. A congregation that only gathers once a week in corporate worship creates a hollow community that does not challenge sinful ways or personal idols. Hollow communities in turn, produce passive “disciples” who live their lives in such a way that is indistinguishable from a secular culture. Is this God’s design for disciple-making?

Seeking to explore the relationship between church growth and discipleship in their own rapidly growing congregation, mega-church and Church Growth Movement leader, Willow Creek Community Church, engaged in a comprehensive congregational survey. The church published results in their 2007 book, *Reveal: Where Are You*. Their research reported that heavy involvement in “seeker sensitive” programs and activities contributed to church growth, but did not necessarily translate into spiritual growth and maturity.<sup>15</sup>

Reflecting on the church’s mission to make disciples, missiologist Ed Stetzer writes, “There is a great lack of theological depth in much of the contemporary *Church Growth Movement* because much of these are movements of technique, paradigms, and

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13. Kevin Ford, *Transforming Church: Bringing Out the Good to Get to Great* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook Publishing, 2008), 68.

14. Ford, *Transforming Church*, 69.

15. Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Reveal: Where Are You?* (Barrington, IL: WillowCreek Resources, 2007), 35.

methodologies without genuine biblical and missiological convictions.”<sup>16</sup> Jared C. Wilson, author and contributing writer for *The Gospel Coalition*, agrees in his recent article entitled, “The Attractional Church’s Growing Irrelevance.” In it, he writes, “I find it incredibly interesting, sort of amusing, and more than a bit sad that the attractional church—what we used to call the ‘seeker church’—hasn’t seemed to grow up at all. Yes, it’s grown big. But growing big and growing up aren’t the same thing.”<sup>17</sup>

While some defend the Church Growth Movement’s original intent to refocus the church’s efforts in reaching the lost, most leaders now recognize its destructive legacy – the deep problem of Consumerism in the church. In their book, *Renovation of the Church: What Happens When a Seeker Church Discovers Spiritual Formation*, pastors Kent Carlson and Mike Lueken tell the story of the church they founded in Folsom, California, employing the methods they learned from mega-church Willow Creek Community Church. Although by Church Growth Movement standards (attendance, growth, and income) their congregation was a “success,” Carlson and Lueken gradually came to the realization that they had created a “monster,” as their congregation needed constant feeding with the “next new thing or extravaganza.”<sup>18</sup> Carlson remarks, “When we structure a church around attracting people to cutting-edge, entertaining, interesting, inspirational and always-growing services and ministries, there is simply no room for

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16. Edwin Stetzer, “The Evolution of Church Growth, Church Health, and the Missional Church: An Overview of the Church Growth Movement from, and back to, its Missional Roots,” January 2005, accessed October 24, 2019, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/assets/10231.pdf>, 10.

17. Jared C. Wilson, “The Attractional Church’s Growing Irrelevance,” *The Gospel Coalition*, July 28, 2016, accessed October 24, 2019, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/jared-c-wilson/the-attractional-churchs-growing-irrelevance/>.

18. Kent Carlson and Mike Lueken, *Renovation of the Church: What Happens When a Seeker Church Discovers Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 24.

letting up.” Carlson and Lueken “began to grow increasingly uneasy that this model of doing church might be unhealthy for the people whose understanding of the Christian life was shaped by a church culture that treated them as religious consumers.”<sup>19</sup>

Why is the issue of consumerism within the church such a dangerous problem for church leaders today? Quite simply, consumerism has the power to construct a false identity, which is counter to the gospel’s message of self-sacrifice and cost of discipleship. Consumerism in America has become an all-pervasive idol and “rock in the road” for many churches:

It (consumerism) occupies a role in society that once belonged only to religion – the power to give meaning and construct identity. Consumerism represents an alternative source of meaning to the Christian gospel. No longer merely an economic system, consumerism has become the American worldview – the framework through which we interpret everything else, including God, the gospel, and church.<sup>20</sup>

As a result of the Church Growth Movement, the western church has experienced significant change. For more than thirty years, numerical growth in church membership has been the result of transferring memberships, as opposed to new professions of faith or genuine “Kingdom growth.”<sup>21</sup> Methods to reach non-Christians are not drawing people into authentic Christian community where the Gospel message is “worked out cognitively and worked in practically.”<sup>22</sup> The role of “member” has been relegated to “religious consumer” where often one is only valued for what they can offer to the organization. All

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19. Carlson and Lueken, *Renovation of the Church*, 27.

20. Skye Jethani, “All We Like Sheep: Is Our Insistence on Choices Leading Us Astray?” *Leadership Journal* 27, no. 3 (Summer 2006):

21. Hawkins and Parkinson, *Reveal*, 69.

22. Tim Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 311.

of these factors collectively do not create a discipling community or family on mission made up of individuals whose lives have been transformed by the love of Christ, and who now live to bear witness to the reign and rule of Jesus Christ.<sup>23</sup> Despite significant amounts of time, money and resources, studies show the local church is not universally reaching or building a new generation of devoted disciples of Jesus.<sup>24</sup>

The Barna Institute estimates that in 1950, it took approximately 30 to 35 people to lead one person to Christ. Today, that ratio is closer to 90:1.<sup>25</sup> With each passing generation, the church's ability to make new disciples is proving increasingly ineffective. The church's loss of influence and lack of discipleship can no longer be ignored. Simply stated, the church is not equipping disciples who in turn, make disciples. Has the church forgotten her primary calling?

### **Thesis-project**

While there are many opportunities for gospel renewal and congregational transformation, I am most interested in the area of engaging new members into the process of discipleship. When a person joins a particular congregation, there is a rare opportunity to invest in that individual's spiritual formation and discipleship life. While churches employ various methods to educate and assimilate new members, most congregations are using an outdated model with little focus on discipleship or disciple-making. As statistics above reveal, these methods are not effectively equipping Christians

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23. Frost, *The Road to Missional*, 21.

24. Hawkins and Parkinson, *Reveal*, 57.

25. Dr. Terry Gyger, "South Carolina Global Network: Church Planting Conference" (lecture, First Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, January 23, 2017).

to engage non-Christians with the gospel, and fall significantly short of serving Christ's Great Commission.<sup>26</sup>

I believe the traditional method for orienting new members is not effectively making disciples who, in turn, make disciples. How then does the 21<sup>st</sup>-century evangelical church prepare new members for a life of Christian discipleship? How may a new member orientation influence a life discipleship?<sup>27</sup> In light of my study of discipleship within the missional church and with information gathered from new members, I am seeking to craft a missional new member orientation and measure its effectiveness as a launch into a life of discipleship.

This project will take place at First Presbyterian Church (FPC), a 3,800-member congregation located in downtown Greenville, SC. For decades, FPC has used a traditional ministry model that seeks to teach prospective new members about the Presbyterian faith, and provide an overview of the ministries of the church. The assumption has been correct teaching and the distribution of information regarding ministries with which to engage will make “good church members.” However, as the statistics above reveal, “good church members” have little correlation to disciple-makers. While this congregation has experienced consistent growth in membership over the last several years, a significant “back door” exists. Membership rolls and worship attendance reveal the total number of active and engaged membership, year over year, is stagnant or declining.<sup>28</sup> I believe offering a missional new member orientation built on discipleship will serve as a more effective launch into a life of discipleship.

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26. Matthew 28:19.

27. Discipleship is defined here as “disciple-making.” Bobby Harrington and Alex Absalom, *Discipleship That Fits* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 18.

28. See Appendix A for Membership Statistics Report.

## **Historical and Current Contexts**

First Presbyterian Church has a rich history. In 1840, entrepreneur and philanthropist Vardry McBee deeded four parcels of land for the construction of four Protestant churches which would form a shape of a cross and become the very center of downtown Greenville. Soon after the land was deeded, a group of women petitioned the Southern Church Presbytery of South Carolina for their assistance in organizing a Presbyterian church on the property. In November of 1847, the Southern Church Presbytery commissioned The Rev. Savage Smith Gaillard as “stated supply pastor” to the village of Greenville. Greenville’s first Presbyterian congregation was officially established as The Presbyterian Church of the Greenville Court House on February 28, 1848. Sixteen charter members, including a female African American slave belonging to one of the members, were present to mark the occasion. These early members oversaw the completion of the congregation’s first building in 1851. In the church’s 169 years of existence, the congregation has installed ten senior pastors, allowing each pastor to make his mark on the congregation. Since those early days, the physical facilities have undergone significant building renovations and expansion projects to accommodate a steady trajectory of membership growth.

Today, First Presbyterian Church is a large, vibrant downtown church, deeply committed to the biblical preaching and teaching of its members. Each Sunday, the church offers three worship services with a combined average weekly worship attendance of 1500. The church hosts an average of 14,500 events each year. Ministries include Worship, Christian Education for adults, youth and children, Congregational Care, Evangelism, Fellowship and Activities, Administration, and Stewardship. Additionally,



the church houses a private Christian preschool, elementary, and middle school with 306 students on its campus. The church and school employ a combined 139 people in ministry staff and faculty, including seven ordained pastors, a full kitchen staff, seven sextons, and full-time security.

In 2004, the church unveiled a comprehensive strategic plan and formally adopted the vision statement of *Growing Faithful Christians*. The strategic plan included ambitious goals for each area of ministry listed above, which included hiring additional staff to oversee new ministries and programs. In 2007, the congregation called The Rev. Dr. Richard Gibbons as its tenth senior pastor. Dr. Gibbons committed to uphold faithfully the church's vision of *Growing Faithful Christians* and has brought a renewed emphasis on the priority of worship. As a result of long-standing concerns and growing differences in theological beliefs with the church's denomination, the Presbyterian Church, USA (PCUSA), FPC's congregation voted to leave the PCUSA and join the newly established denomination, The Covenant Order for Evangelical Presbyterians (ECO) in May 2012.

In May 2014, FPC contracted with TAG Consulting, Inc., a national consulting firm specializing in strategic planning and organizational assessment. FPC leadership engaged TAG to discern how well the congregation was living out the church's current mission statement, and to provide guidance on key strategic issues for a new visioning process. As a part of their process, TAG conducted a congregational survey, facilitated focus groups for members, visitors, and staff, and provided national comparisons to serve as benchmarks for areas identified as strengths or opportunities for growth. After nine months of research and analysis, TAG distributed a Discovery Report identifying the

congregation's top strengths and areas for improvement, in ranking order as presented below:

Table 1. TAG Assessment: Strengths and Areas for Improvement

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<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Areas for Improvement</b>
1. Learning	1. Aging congregation/Difficulty in Reaching Young Adults
2. Worship	2. Connection Difficulties
3. Building	3. Staff Dependence
4. Families	
5. Implementation	

### Observations

Three of the top five strengths (Learning, Worship, and Building) were identified as FPC's "code" or shared identity. Kevin Ford, author and founder of TAG Consulting, defines "code" as an organization's "genetic blueprint that expresses a congregation's unique personality to members, visitors and community."<sup>29</sup> Ford contends that church leaders who take time to discover a church's code, position themselves to work congruently with the church's gifts, passions and ministry, particularly when seeking to lead others through change. Ford also explained that the longer an organization has been in existence, the more established it is in values, behaviors, and beliefs, and the more challenging it is to facilitate change.

It is interesting to note that some of the church's strengths also represent the congregation's biggest challenges. For instance, while the report findings affirmed a

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29. Ford, *Transforming Church*, 111.

strong commitment to Biblical teaching and preaching, FPC employs the traditional Sunday school model to disciple members. This model is largely passive in style, offering little opportunity for group discussion, relationship building, or personal accountability. Additionally, families were identified as a “strength” as FPC is privileged to serve many three- and four-generation families. Alternatively, the report cites that one of the issues facing a maturing congregation is the struggle to reach and engage younger adults.

The Congregation scored lower than the national average in the area of helping people connect with others and serve in ministry. Ironically, the ratio of hired staff relative to membership is more than double the national average. Despite having seven ordained pastors and a program staff that is twice the national average, the report indicates FPC is not effectively engaging members by connecting them into meaningful ministry. Not surprisingly, TAG’s research and analysis identified “consumerism” as FPC’s central issue. The executive summary states,

Through the Discovery Process, we believe that FPCG (First Presbyterian Church, Greenville) is largely a consumer-oriented church. In a church, consumerism is caused by two primary factors: the influence of American culture on our people and the systems and leadership structures within the church that are designed, unintentionally, to support consumerism. FPC’s operating norms and processes have likely created greater efficiency and focus but have also had an unintended consequence: passivity among the people. When the flow of information is controlled too tightly and robust disagreement and discussion is curtailed, the stakeholders disengage. When the stakeholders disengage, because they don’t believe they can make a difference, they become passive partakers of whatever is offered. Simply put: they become more of a consumer and less of a contributor.<sup>30</sup>

While focus group attendees praised the effectiveness of ministries and high quality of biblical preaching and teaching, it was also noted the majority of ministries are experienced by church members and not outsiders. It is especially significant that the majority of participants in the survey and focus groups saw themselves as the primary

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30. The entirety of the TAG Executive Summary may be found in Appendix B.

beneficiary of services. Stated another way, members saw themselves as consumers rather than a family on mission to reach a community and world that does not yet know Christ. The TAG report concluded by stating, “If FPC members do not thrive on a mission that is external in nature, then the current path is simply unsustainable.”

### Summary

Like many churches in America, this report reveals that FPC has become largely internally focused, and exists primarily to serve the needs of its own members. While heavily involved in external missions both locally and internationally, the church has cultivated “Come to Us” mentality that requires non-believers to step foot on the church’s campus to experience discipleship through programs and events. Pastors and key leaders are hired and chosen to deliver ministries and services that treat the congregation as consumers. Loss of influence within the culture, an aging congregation and the inability to connect people within the church are symptoms of a bigger problem. The church gave away her influence by becoming internally focused, and drifted away from her primary calling to make disciples who make disciples.

How does the church find her rightful place in God’s design to make disciples who make disciples? What is God’s design for his church and the role of a disciple? In chapter two, I will provide a theological framework in which to answer these questions. In chapter three, I will consider what others have written concerning the topic of new member discipleship. Finally, in chapters four and five I will set forth the project design and describe outcomes. The purpose of my research will be to ascertain the impact a revised new member orientation has on an individual’s engagement into life on life

ministry within the church. I believe a gospel-centered curriculum that focuses on an individual's spiritual formation and includes an intentional connectional component into life on life community will serve as a launch to discipleship.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Jesus commissioned the church to be his instrument in the world. In his letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul declares, “His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.”<sup>1</sup> The church – God’s people – is central in revealing God’s wisdom to the universe. Each Christian generation is charged to seek answers to two questions: Is the church faithfully living into her divine purpose? How well are God’s people demonstrating the reconciling love of the gospel *and* equipping others to engage the culture in which we live?

In Christendom, the church drifted away from her primary calling to make disciples and did not cultivate a people to live on mission as Jesus did. By neglecting this crucial element in her design, the church gradually lost her ability to influence a culture for Christ. How will the church restore her witness and influence? In this chapter, I will argue that as God’s people are realigned with the Mission of God and recover a biblical vision of discipleship, the church will restore her witness and begin to cultivate a people who live on mission.

#### **Part One: Discipleship Begins with God’s Mission**

Intentional discipleship begins with recalling the Mission of God and story from

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1. Ephesians 3:10. All Scripture quotations come from the New International Version of the Bible (1984) unless otherwise noted.

which we come.<sup>2</sup> It is possible to have a working knowledge of individual Scriptures, yet miss the overall vision for the Mission of God and plan for his people.<sup>3</sup> Throughout Scripture, the themes of “covenant” and “kingdom” simultaneously reveal that God, by nature, is a relational and sending God.<sup>4</sup> In Genesis 12, God said to Abram, “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you ... and all peoples on earth will be blessed *through* you.”<sup>5</sup> In the story of God calling Abram, we learn that God is a covenant-making, covenant-keeping God, who calls a people into relationship with himself in order to share his covenant identity with them.<sup>6</sup> The phrase “I will be their God and they will be my people” is a recurring poetic narrative that runs throughout the Old and New Testaments.<sup>7</sup> However, God’s mission is not complete with only calling people into lasting relationship. The call to demonstrate the presence of God’s kingdom is the equally strong theme that runs throughout all of Scripture. Exodus 19 tells the story of God rescuing his people from slavery, only to commission them as his royal representatives in his mission to bless the nations:

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although

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2. Christopher J. H. Wright, *Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 49.

3. J. R. Woodward and Dan White, Jr., *Church as Movement: Starting and Sustaining Missional-Incarnational Communities* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2016), 119.

4. Mike Breen and Sally Breen, *Family on Mission: Integrating Discipleship into the Fabric of Our Everyday Lives* (Pawley’s Island, SC: 3 Dimension Ministries Publishing, 2014), 19.

5. Genesis 12:1, 3.

6. Mike Breen, *Covenant and Kingdom: The DNA of the Bible* (Pawleys Island, SC: 3 Dimension Ministries, 2010), 125-128.

7. The phrase “I will be their God and they will be my people” appears over 50 times in the Old and New Testaments.

the whole earth is mine, *you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*<sup>8</sup>

It is within the cherished covenant relationship that God extends his kingship identity. Once slaves in Egypt, God's people are now elevated to the status of priests in his kingdom, and reinstated to represent him to the nations. Beginning with Abraham and with each generation to follow, God built a relational bridge back to his people by extending his covenant and kingdom identity.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, these two themes find their fullest expression in Jesus Christ whose mission to rescue, redeem, and restore God's family is the Father's will.<sup>10</sup> Mike Breen, author of *Covenant and Kingdom: the DNA of the Bible*, writes, "As the vertical and horizontal bars of the cross were bound together to form an instrument of execution and torture, so both threads of Scripture were captured in time. The vast sweep of the story of God and the immeasurable depth of his love found their focus here, definitively expressed."<sup>11</sup>

Recognizing God as "rescuer" is paramount in the formation of his people's identity. In his letter to the Colossians, the Apostle Paul writes, "For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves."<sup>12</sup> In his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus fulfilled God's covenant promises by becoming the once and for all sacrifice for his peoples' sins.<sup>13</sup> The desire to live in faithful obedience flows directly from an identity rooted in trusted covenant relationship with the God who

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8. Exodus 19:4-6.

9. Breen, *Covenant and Kingdom*, 126.

10. Breen, *Covenant and Kingdom*, 137.

11. Breen, *Covenant and Kingdom*, 139.

12. Colossians 1:13.

13. Galatians 3:29.



saves. In his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus simultaneously ushered in a new Kingdom and restored humankind's ability to represent God as his royal emissaries.<sup>14</sup> Greg Ogden, author of *Transforming Discipleship* writes, "The dominant theme in Jesus' public ministry was the proclamation of the good news of the Kingdom of God. The future, long awaited Kingdom, where the rule and reign of God would be actualized on earth, had broken into this present darkness in the person of the King, Jesus Christ."<sup>15</sup> The King of the universe who calls people into loving, lasting relationship also appoints them to represent him in the world.

In Isaiah 1, the people sought intimacy with God in worship, however did not show care or concern for the oppressed. As justice has a prominent place in God's heart and character, God's response reveals his anger and discontent: "I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan and rescue the widow."<sup>16</sup> God does not desire pietistic worship that separates his people from the rest of the world. The story of God supremely reveals his rescue mission.<sup>17</sup> We belong to a missional God, and at the very center of his missional character, the church finds her identity and purpose: "You will be my witnesses."<sup>18</sup> J. R. Woodward and Dan White, Jr., authors of *Church as Movement*, explore the harmonious

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14. 1 Peter 2:9-12, Acts 1:8.

15. Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 28.

16. Isaiah 1:15-17.

17. Missiologist and author Ed Stetzer writes that God's rescue story is the grand narrative of the Bible: "God's mighty acts make Him known to the peoples of the world and are predicted, proclaimed, explained, and celebrated throughout the biblical storyline." Ed Stetzer, "The Metanarrative of God's Mission: A Closer Look from the Mission of God Study Bible," *Christianity Today*, May 30, 2012, accessed October 24, 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2012/may/metanarrative-of-gods-mission-closer-look-from-mission-of.html>.

18. Acts 1:8.

relationship between God's missional character and his people's identity: "God is missional in his very essence. The Father sends the Son into the world to reveal and inaugurate the kingdom; the Father and Son send the Spirit into the world to continue their work, and the Son sends the church into the world, through the power of the Spirit, *so that we can join our triune God in the renewal of all things.*"<sup>19</sup>

### **Identity Empowers Mission**

Knowing God as a missional God has far reaching implications for his people. First, it reveals that "mission" begins with God, and is his gift to give. The church itself is not the mission, but the vessel through which God's mission flows. David Bosch, author of *Transforming Mission*, writes, "Mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God."<sup>20</sup> The church, therefore, is only "on mission" because it was created and redeemed by a God who is himself "on mission." This means that God's people are not so much participating in mission *for* God, as *being* missional *with* God.<sup>21</sup> This realization represents a major shift in thinking for the western church today where activities of each church are often an end unto themselves. As the church realigns with the story and Mission of God, his people look beyond themselves to find their place within God's grand narrative as his instrument for mission.<sup>22</sup>

Second, knowing God as a missional God reveals that at the very center of God's nature is a relational community: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God himself is "Family on

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19. Woodward and White, *Church as Movement*, 120. Emphasis mine.

20. David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 389–390.

21. Breen and Breen, *Family on Mission*, 21.

22. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 531.

Mission.”<sup>23</sup> This relational community appears at Jesus’ baptism: “As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’”<sup>24</sup> In this story, the gospel writers reveal that Jesus’ ministry does not begin with a mighty display of miracles, but rather with the Father speaking a message of identity over him: “This is *My* son, of whom I am well pleased.”<sup>25</sup> Before Jesus performs one miracle, his Father affirms him. The Trinity’s presence at Jesus’ baptism reveals that Jesus is not operating independently but comes from a family to represent a family.<sup>26</sup> For what purpose did Jesus come? Jesus came to restore God’s family on mission by sharing both his covenant and kingdom identity.<sup>27</sup> Repeatedly throughout his ministry, Jesus points to his relationship with the Father as a basis for explaining the mission he’s been given: “Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can only do what he sees his Father doing.”<sup>28</sup> Family on Mission is rooted in the very nature of God.<sup>29</sup> In the same way, Jesus cultivated his disciples to live on mission by first reframing the relationship they share:

I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so

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23. Breen and Breen, *Family on Mission*, 22.

24. Matthew 3:16,17.

25. Author’s paraphrase of Matthew 3:16.

26. Breen and Breen, *Family on Mission*, 22.

27. Matthew 12:50.

28. John 5:19. Other passages which reference this same idea can also be found in John 6:38 and John 4:34.

29. Breen and Breen, *Family on Mission*, 11.

that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other.<sup>30</sup>

According to *The New International Commentary on The Gospel of John*, a slave is someone who is unaware of his master's business.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, Jesus refers to his disciples as "friends," because he delights to share everything he has learned from his Father.<sup>32</sup> The mission to "love each other" flows directly from an identity deeply rooted in an abiding relationship with God. By God's design, identity empowers mission. The one compels the other.

Writing to encourage Christians in Asia Minor who were exiled for their faith in Christ, the Apostle Peter describes God's family on mission in this way: "As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a *spiritual house* to be a holy priesthood."<sup>33</sup> The translation for "spiritual house" originates from the Greek word "oikos" meaning "a household or extended family."<sup>34</sup> Peter uses this strong metaphor to explain that God is building a house, not with physical bricks and stones, but with his people. This spiritual house is the church – the people of God, a family on mission, where God himself promises to dwell. Recalling God's promises to the people of Israel in Exodus 19, Peter then reminds these new believers of their covenant identity: "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession" in order to demonstrate their

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30. John 15:15-17.

31. J. Ramsey Michaels, *The New International Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), 674.

32. John 15:16.

33. 1 Peter 2:9.

34. Timothy J. Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 278.

kingdom identity: “that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”<sup>35</sup> Identity empowers mission. The one compels the other.

Jesus came to restore God’s family on mission by sharing his covenant and kingdom identity with his people. J. R. Woodward, author of *Creating a Missional Culture*, emphasizes the significance and shallowness of a misplaced identity. He writes, “When someone says, ‘Let’s go to church,’ it reveals a lack of understanding of the nature of the church. The church is the people of God. Church is not something we go to, it is something we are. We go to a weekly gathering, we attend a service, but we are the church.”<sup>36</sup> An identity deeply rooted in God empowers the mission of his people to bear witness to his reign and rule in their everyday life.<sup>37</sup> Conversely, without an identity firmly rooted in a relational and sending God, people wander aimlessly like “characters in search of a story.” Tim Keller, author of *Every Good Endeavor*, writes,

Our tendency is to place our lives within the context of some narrative structure. And if you get the story of the world wrong, if for example you see life here as mainly about self-actualization and self-fulfillment rather than the love of God – you will get your life responses wrong, including the way you go about your work. We all adopt a worldview. All of us are living out some mental world story that gives our lives meaning.<sup>38</sup>

Has the church been living in the wrong story? By failing to acknowledge her identity through the lens of God’s missional character, has the church unwittingly reduced the gospel and empowered a meaningless mission? In Christendom, discipleship

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35. 1 Peter 2:9

36. J. R. Woodward, *Creating a Missional Culture: Equipping the Church for the sake of the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 36.

37. Breen and Breen, *Family on Mission*, 72.

38. Tim Keller, *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God’s Work* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2012), 156.

morphed into something far different from what is seen in the early church. Attending worship twice a month, giving non-sacrificially, and participating in an occasional mission project has not produced families on mission. Nor has a passive education model produced the kind of heart change seen in the early church and with followers of Jesus. Cultivating people who are content to learn all about the gospel but are not challenged to confront personal sins, was never the mission. The story and Mission of God is the backdrop for Jesus' ministry. Going forward, the church must remember the full story and Mission of God in order to live out the covenant and kingdom identity we have so graciously been given. By God's design, the church, God's people, are a family on mission. When the church joyfully organizes around the Mission and story of God, God's people are realigned with their primary purpose to "join the Triune God in the renewal of all things."<sup>39</sup> God's design for his people is to walk in close communion with him, bearing witness to his reign and rule where we live, work, and play. Identity empowers mission. The one compels the other.

## **Part Two: Making Disciples as Jesus Made**

At the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus lays out his mission before his disciples: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."<sup>40</sup>

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39. Woodward and White, *Church as Movement*, 120.

40. Matthew 28:16-20.

In this passage, the Risen Jesus makes it clear that disciple-making *is* the mission. The One who has been given authority over the entire universe now sends his disciples to replicate his life in others: “Go. Baptize people into the Family on Mission. As a part of being in the Family, teach them the way to live, just as I have taught you. Cultivate my life in them by valuing my commands above all others. And finally, as a reminder, you are not alone on this mission. I will never leave you.”<sup>41</sup>

J. R. Woodward and Dan White, authors of *The Church as Movement*, argue that, before one can *make* disciples, he or she must *be* one.<sup>42</sup> What does it mean to *be* a disciple? Translated from the Greek word *mathētēs*, the word “disciple” is defined by Strong’s Concordance as “learner; a person who learns from another by instruction whether formal or informal.”<sup>43</sup> The Vines Expository Dictionary adds that a disciple is “not only a pupil, but an adherent, as one who imitates their teacher.”<sup>44</sup> As the New Testament demonstrates, becoming a disciple is far more than an intellectual exercise. Those who respond to the call of Jesus are not merely aspiring to learn and master knowledge or certain objectives, but rather are learning *to live a life that imitates Jesus*.<sup>45</sup> Being a disciple means becoming a life-long learner of Jesus. As Francis Chan writes, “It’s impossible to be a disciple or a follower of someone and not end up like that person. Jesus said, ‘A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully

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41. Author’s paraphrase of Matthew 28: 16-20.

42. Woodward and White, *Church as Movement*, 73.

43. James Strong, *The New Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville: T. Nelson, 1996), s.v. “disciple.”

44. W.E. Vine, *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville: T. Nelson, 2003), s.v. “disciple.”

45. Mike Breen, *Building a Discipling Culture: How to Release a Missional Movement by Discipling People Like Jesus Did* (Pawleys Island, SC: 3DM, 2011), 21, emphasis mine.

trained will be like his teacher' (Luke 6: 40). That's the whole point of being a disciple of Jesus: we imitate Him, carry on His ministry, and become like Him in the process."<sup>46</sup>

Jesus' life and ministry serve as a blueprint for how he replicated his life in the life of another. These patterns were practiced in the first century where the spread of Christianity saw its most significant growth.<sup>47</sup> Learning to live a life that imitates Jesus is a journey of transformation and lifelong pursuit.<sup>48</sup> As the church reclaims the patterns of intentional discipleship demonstrated by Jesus and employed by the early church, the people of God will begin to cultivate disciples who live on mission. How did Jesus make disciples and cultivate a people to live on mission? Jesus' life and ministry focused on intentional discipleship: he formed disciples in the transforming power of the gospel, in the context of community, and as he sent them to make disciples.

### **The Gospel and Transformation**

When Jesus called people into a relationship, he called them into a whole new life and way of being. To the religious scholar asking deep questions about eternal life, Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, mind, soul and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself."<sup>49</sup> This commandment from Jesus is considered to be the greatest and highest calling in a Christian's life. The call of Jesus is always a call for transformation of the heart, intended to impact every area of life.

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46. Francis Chan and Mark Beuving, *Multiply: Disciples Making Disciples* (Colorado Springs: David C Cook, 2012), 16, Kindle.

47. Timothy J. Keller, *Center Church: Doing Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 277.

48. Philippians 3:2. The Apostle Paul, at the end of his life, is growing in his understanding of the call of Jesus.

49. Matthew 22:37-39.



Gospel transformation lies at the very heart of intentional discipleship. In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul describes the gospel as “the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.”<sup>50</sup> This is good news. Paul was a man well acquainted with the kind of transformation that the gospel brings. In his encounter with Christ, Paul was confronted with the crisis of his own sin. In repentance and faith, he experienced the genuine joy that comes from receiving forgiveness and being called into the Family on Mission. By the gospel’s sheer grace, Paul experienced a radical reorientation of his heart to God’s mission. Instead of persecuting people for their faith in Christ, he lived the rest of his life on a new mission as an ambassador of Jesus, cultivating the life of Christ in others. Paul could later share with confidence as one who knows firsthand: “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.”<sup>51</sup> The gospel is a call to change.

Tim Keller, author of *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*, explores the relationship between the gospel’s saving grace and continual transformation of the heart. He writes, “The Gospel of Christ will bring increasing transformation and wholeness across all the dimensions of life that were marred by the Fall.”<sup>52</sup> To those who believe the gospel is only about the moment of salvation, Keller admonishes, “The gospel is not the ABC’s of the Christian life, but the A-Z’s of Christianity.”<sup>53</sup> Keller also asserts that the “gospel is not the minimum required doctrine

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50. Romans 1:16.

51. 2 Corinthians 5:17.

52. Keller, *Center Church*, 48.

53. Keller, *Center Church*, 48.

necessary to enter the kingdom, but the way we all make progress in the kingdom.”<sup>54</sup> Consequently, the change Jesus desires in his people is not merely the result of increasing knowledge or engaging in acts of service. Transformation happens as a person is “convicted of their sin and alienation from God, and begins to see in themselves layers of self-justification, unbelief, and self-righteousness.”<sup>55</sup> This process takes time and does not happen all at once.<sup>56</sup> God is most concerned with one’s interior life and the person they are becoming.<sup>57</sup> As the implications of the gospel are worked out in each area of an individual’s life, a new identity is formed; one that increasingly learns to trust in God to meet all of their needs.<sup>58</sup> The transforming power of the gospel reorders disordered loves and desires, and works to develop an inner life that allows an individual to withstand the pressures encountered in daily life.

Authors Woodward and White describe the transformation of character that occurs as a result of living in the gospel as “the upside down life” of Jesus. They write, “There is something that is counterintuitive about the life of Jesus. He teaches that if we really want to live, we must die, that the way to spiritual richness is to acknowledge our spiritual poverty, and that the way to rule is to become the servant of all.”<sup>59</sup> The early church did not employ a step-by-step manual to cultivate the “upside down” life of Jesus in others. Rather, Jesus taught the gospel as he *embodied* it. Jesus gave a small number of

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54. Keller, *Center Church*, 54.

55. Keller, *Center Church*, 54.

56. Philippians 2:12.

57. Romans 12:2.

58. Keller, *Center Church*, 64.

59. Woodward and White, *Church as Movement*, 74.

disciples access to his life, demonstrating how to live everyday life in the new kingdom with a new set of values. Through parables, teaching, and real life experiences, those closest to him learned that all of life was sacred and worthy of transformation. His presence brought both an invitation and expectation of challenge: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”<sup>60</sup> Jesus also said, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up his cross and follow me.”<sup>61</sup> Jesus’ disciples learned that living in the new kingdom often involved “unlearning” old ways of living as much as learning new ways.<sup>62</sup> Jesus taught his disciples to live a fully surrendered life by living a fully surrendered life. Woodward and White write, “The first century disciples heard Jesus’ teaching, discussed its implication and observed his embodied practice. This is why Jesus could say, ‘go and do likewise.’”<sup>63</sup>

Greg Ogden, author of *Transforming Discipleship*, writes, “Discipleship always implies the existence of a personal attachment which shapes the whole life of the disciple.”<sup>64</sup> Buildings and programs do not disciple people. People disciple people. When the Apostle Paul was confronted on the authenticity of his mission, he did not point to the quality and efficiency of programs or the number of ministries he ran. Rather, he simply pointed to the people he was discipling.<sup>65</sup>

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? You yourselves are our letter,

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60. Matthew 11:28.

61. Matthew 16:24.

62. Colossians 3: 9-10.

63. Woodward and White, *Church as Movement*, 89.

64. Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, 63.

65. Ogden, *Transformational Discipleship*, 12.

written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.<sup>66</sup>

Intentional discipleship is learning to live a life of Jesus in the power of the gospel. The people of God have good news to share: “God saves sinners.”<sup>67</sup> Therefore, the gospel is not an antiquated story that no longer has relevance. Nor is it a clever myth used by some to control, shame, or manipulate people. The gospel is God’s gracious act of redemption and restoration through Jesus Christ to reconcile a people to himself. In and through the transforming power of the gospel, a disciple learns to live in his or her new identity as a child of God.<sup>68</sup> For intentional discipleship to flourish, the church must joyfully recover the premiere role of gospel transformation in a disciple’s life by learning to live a life that imitates Jesus and embodies his teachings.

### **Disciples are Formed in Community**

A look at the early church reveals that Christianity first grew as a significant relational movement as the gospel was shared through households and friendships.<sup>69</sup> With no buildings to maintain or programs to run, discipleship was first fostered through intentional, authentic, and often challenging relationships in community. This implies the

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66. 2 Corinthians 3:1-3.

67. Keller, *Center Church*, 30.

68. John 1:12.

69. Keller, *Center Church*, 277.

exponential growth of Christianity in the first century happened primarily through the expression of a new way of life together.<sup>70</sup>

One prominent picture of relational community in the early church is illustrated in the book of Acts. As a response to the call of the gospel and work of the Holy Spirit, individual believers came together to participate in the regular patterns of worship, prayer, the apostles' teaching, and breaking of bread.<sup>71</sup> New Testament scholars believe these practices were formative in transforming character and shaping individual believers into the people of God; a physical representation of the gospel.<sup>72</sup> Alan Kreider, author of *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire*, specifically attributes the explosive growth of Christianity in the first three centuries to regular worship and practices learned in Christian community. Kreider writes,

The churches grew in many places, taking varied forms. They proliferated because the faith that these fishers and hunters embodied was attractive to people who were dissatisfied with their old cultural and religious habits, who felt pushed to explore new possibilities, and who then encountered Christians who embodied a new manner of life that pulled them toward what the Christians called “rebirth” into a new life. Surprisingly, this happened in a patient manner.<sup>73</sup>

The way in which Christians responded in times of trial and persecution was particularly puzzling to a secular culture living in the first century. Most of the early Christians were not wealthy people, nor did they hold positions of power and control. Yet their new manner of life learned in gospel-centered community allowed them to

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70. Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2016), 12.

71. Acts 2:42.

72. Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4.

73. Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, 12.

demonstrate unusual patience in their daily living that both surprised and compelled the culture around them.<sup>74</sup>

Authentic community embodying the gospel is God's design for his church. When Christians in community share their resources, are generous and responsible in the areas of wealth, power and relationships, they demonstrate an alternate way of living together that bears witness to God's reign and rule and stands out in a "me-centered" culture.<sup>75</sup> In Gospel-centered community, members form a covenant partnership around their new identity in Christ. Loved and forgiven people love and forgive others. Cherished and redeemed people strive to seek the welfare of a community, paying particular attention to those marginalized by an imbalance of power.

To the church in Philippi, a community of believers dealing with internal conflict, the Apostle Paul writes, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility value others better than yourselves."<sup>76</sup> Paul admonishes this troubled church to work out the implications of the gospel with each other, and as they do, they will "shine like stars in a crooked and perverse generation."<sup>77</sup> By God's design, gospel-centered community is the vessel through which disciples are formed. Tim Keller writes, "The real secret of fruitful and effective mission in the world is the quality of our community. Just as the single most formative experience in our lives is membership in a nuclear family, so the main way we grow in grace and holiness is through deep involvement in the family of

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74. Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, 69.

75. Keller, *Center Church*, 312.

76. Philippians 2:3, 4.

77. Philippians 2:15, 16.

God.”<sup>78</sup> A passive Christian education system that fails to foster an environment rich in relational accountability cannot produce the kind of character transformation that leads to a healthy community of believers and life on mission. Woodward and White write, “Before we think about concrete ways that God might have us be a blessing to the neighborhood, we must see that our greatest gift is our life together, our interdependent, love-filled community.”<sup>79</sup>

God intends for his mission to be carried out as a family; a family on mission.

J. R. Woodward, author of *Creating a Missional Culture: Equipping the Church for the Sake of the World*, writes,

The church is called to be a foretaste of God’s kingdom, a place where people can get a taste of the future in the present. When the church is a foretaste, it demonstrates what life is like when men and women live under the rule and reign of God, when the people of God love one another, exhort one another, encourage one another, forgive one another, and live in harmony with one another. In this way, the church becomes a concrete, tangible, though not perfect, foretaste of the kingdom that is to come.<sup>80</sup>

### **Disciples are Formed as They are Sent**

Jesus formed his disciples in the transforming power of the gospel, in gospel-centered community, and finally, as he sent them into the world to make disciples. At the very center of God’s missional character, the church finds her identity and purpose as a family on mission. “You will be my witnesses.”<sup>81</sup> Realigning with the story of God means God’s people join his rescue mission. Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, so I

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78. Keller, *Center Church*, 311.

79. Woodward and White, *Church as Movement*, 123.

80. Woodward, *Creating a Missional Culture*, 28.

81. Acts 1:8.

send you.”<sup>82</sup> Being “sent” is an integral part of God’s people’s identity. Identity empowers mission.

Learning how to represent Jesus’ kingship in the world can be a risky undertaking. Jim Martin, author of *The Just Church: Becoming a Risk-taking, Justice-seeking, Disciple-making Congregation*, reminds the church that risk-taking is historically the way God built strong disciples to bravely carry his mission in the world. In Luke 10, Jesus sends the 72 out in his name and under his authority. As a sign and foretaste of a new kingdom and way of life, he instructed his disciples to “heal the sick and tell them the kingdom of God has come near.”<sup>83</sup> Significantly, Jesus did not send his disciples on their journey with an abundance of supplies, but intentionally sent them out with only the clothes on their back. In this passage, Jesus was teaching his disciples to trust in him to meet every need. Throughout the gospels and in the early church, we see that God grows his disciples through faith that has been tested. In Philippians 2, Paul commends both Timothy and Epaphroditus to the people of Philippi, for their willingness to be “sent” and for their unfailing obedience and faithfulness to the mission in the face of difficulty.<sup>84</sup>

In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, learning to “be sent” represents the church’s greatest weakness but also her greatest opportunity. Keller writes, “There has always been a strong tendency for Christians to withdraw into a kind of closed, evangelical, monastic

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82. John 20:21.

83. Luke 10: 9.

84. Philippians 2:19-30.



community.”<sup>85</sup> However, Keller also points out that everyone in the early church was expected to share the good news about what Jesus had done in their everyday life.<sup>86</sup>

The church will cultivate disciples to live on mission as God’s people leave the safe and sacred sanctuaries to join God courageously and humbly where he is already at work in the world. Martin writes, “Through the pursuit of justice we find our way to deep intimacy with a God who loves us and calls us into work not only for the good of others, but for our own good as well.”<sup>87</sup> Martin argues that genuine faith is a growing collaboration between belief and trust, and trust is only built by taking risks. Disciples are made as they are “sent” to bear witness to his reign and rule as they present Jesus to the world where they work, live and play.

### Summary

God is by nature both a relational God, who loves his people with an everlasting love, and a sending God, who commissions his followers to bear witness to his reign and rule.<sup>88</sup> Made in his image and transformed by his saving grace, God’s story becomes our story, and the “covenant” people of God are equally the “kingdom” people of God. Jesus came to heal God’s family on mission. Intentional discipleship is all about learning to live a life that imitates Jesus in the power of the gospel. Jesus’ life and ministry serve as a blueprint for how he intends for his life to be replicated in the life of another. As the church rediscovers the missional heart of God, she is reminded of her true identity and

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85. Keller, *Center Church*, 277.

86. Keller, *Center Church*, 277.

87. Jim Martin, *The Just Church: Becoming a Risk-taking, Justice-seeking, Disciple-making Congregation* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2012), 74.

88. Jeremiah 31:3; John 20:21.

purpose: *“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness and into his wonderful light.”*<sup>89</sup>

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89. 1 Peter 2:9.

## CHAPTER THREE

### LITERATURE REVIEW

“We are perfectly designed to achieve what we are currently achieving.”<sup>1</sup> This is one missiologist’s discouraging commentary on how the western church is fulfilling Christ’s Commission and mandate to make disciples.<sup>2</sup> The argument thus far has been while the church became proficient in many areas of congregational life, the central role of disciple-making was neglected. That is to say, the way of being “the church” in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries has proven ineffective in fostering a culture of discipleship that leads to disciple-making. In his classic book *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis famously reminds the church of her primary purpose. He writes, “The Church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became Man for no other purpose.”<sup>3</sup> Now, more than sixty years after *Mere Christianity* was first published, numerous missional authors challenge pastors and leaders to recognize the significant discipleship gap that exists, and reimagine a new way forward of being the church with discipleship as the focus.

Philosopher and Christian author Dallas Willard writes, “The greatest issue facing the world today, with all its heartbreaking needs, is whether those who, by profession or culture, are identified as ‘Christians’ will become disciples – students,

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1. Alan Hirsch, *Forgotten Ways: Reactivating Apostolic Movements* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011), 82.

2. Matthew 28:16-20.

3 C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins Publishing, 1952), 199.

apprentices, practitioners – of Jesus Christ, steadily learning from him.”<sup>4</sup> Authors write numerous books each year on the subjects of congregational transformation and discipleship. The authors I review below provide key insights and several related themes on the subject of intentional discipleship. As I am most interested in the area of new member discipleship, the focus of this literature review will seek to answer one important question: what kind of environment engages new church members on a path of discipleship that leads to disciple-making?

### **Part One: Beginning With the End in Mind**

When it comes to creating a discipling culture, Alan Hirsch, a leader in the missional movement and author of *Forgotten Ways*, encourages the inwardly focused and attractional church to look beyond itself and envision each member in Christian community as *sent ones*. He writes, “So, a missional church is a church that defines itself, and organizes its life around its real purpose as an agent of God’s mission to the world. The mission of God flows directly through every believer and every community of faith that adheres to Jesus.”<sup>5</sup> Recapturing the disciple-making movement ushered in by Jesus is not about a new strategic vision or plan to make the church more attractive, effective, or efficient. The church’s call was never simply to make members of an institution in which people “add” Jesus to an already full and productive life. The call is to be swept up in a new Kingdom and join the movement of disciple-making. Michael Frost, author of *The Road to Missional: The Journey to the Center of the Church*, writes, “Missional leaders

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4. Bobby Harrington and Josh Patrick, *The Disciple Maker’s Handbook: 7 Elements of a Discipleship Lifestyle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 22.

5. Hirsch, *Forgotten Ways*, 82.

don't see changing the church as central to their cause, they want to change the whole world.”<sup>6</sup>

J. R. Woodward, author of *Creating a Missional Culture: Equipping the Church for the Sake of the World*, challenges leaders to begin with this question in mind: “What would the church look like if everyone in the church used their God-given gifts and talents to equip the rest of the church in such a way that the entire church became more like Jesus? And if the whole church looked more like Jesus, how much more would our neighborhoods and cities look like heaven?”<sup>7</sup>

Bobby Harrington and Josh Patrick, authors of *The Disciple Maker's Handbook*, challenge congregations to posture themselves in the position of the early church. They write, “It's time to return to our roots and reclaim our story. In the beginning it was all about Jesus. We call people like this ‘discipleship first’ people, (as) their identity is completely wrapped up in *being* disciples of Jesus who *make* disciples of Jesus.”<sup>8</sup> J. R. Woodward and Dan White, Jr., author of *The Church as Movement: Starting and Sustaining Missional-Incarnational Communities*, observe one of the most significant elements of Jesus' ministry was that he was a disciple-maker.<sup>9</sup> They write, “All of us who self-identify as Christians are called to make disciples of Christ, not just a special

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6. Michael Frost, *The Road to Missional: The Journey to the Center of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 21.

7. J. R. Woodward, *Creating a Missional Culture: Equipping the Church for the Sake of the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 197.

8. Harrington and Patrick, *The Disciple Maker's Handbook*, 19, emphasis mine.

9. J. R. Woodward and Dan White, Jr., *The Church as Movement: Starting and Sustaining Missional-Incarnational Communities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 90.

professionalized group of people.”<sup>10</sup> Beginning with the end in mind reminds us that disciple-making is the mission of every disciple. Disciple-making congregations orient all of church life around equipping people to become disciples who make disciples.

### **Obstacles to Cultivating a Discipling Culture**

While Christ’s call to missional discipleship is clear, it is not always easy. Missional authors identify several obstacles to building a discipling culture. First is the recognition that people don’t appear fully formed and perfected in “being disciples of Jesus who make disciples of Jesus” the moment they become a Christian.<sup>11</sup> Just because someone professes Jesus as Savior, does not mean they automatically assume the life of a disciple or are equipped to join the journey of disciple-making. In his book, *Building a Discipling Culture*, Mike Breen writes, “No one accidentally makes disciples. Discipleship is an intentional pursuit.”<sup>12</sup> Why, then, do churches structure congregational life as though becoming a “member” is the end goal? James Choung, author of *Real Life: A Christianity Worth Living Out*, asks church leaders, “Are we doing a good job of preparing the people of faith for the ‘long obedience in the same direction’? Are we possibly better at getting people to cross the starting line than getting them to break the tape at the finish?”<sup>13</sup>

Eric Geiger, Michael Kelley, and Philip Nation attribute most of the discipleship

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10. Woodward and White, *The Church as Movement*, 19.

11. Harrington and Patrick, *The Disciple Maker’s Handbook*, 25.

12. Mike Breen, *Building a Discipling Culture: How to Release a Missional Movement by Discipling People like Jesus Did* (Pawley’s Island, SC: 3 Dimension Ministries, 2016), 17.

13. James Choung, *Real Life: A Christianity Worth Living Out* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), LOC 70, Kindle.

problems to one significant flaw: the church has settled for an inferior definition of discipleship. These authors contend that the only definition worthy of Christ's Great Commission is gospel transformation that leads to obedience.<sup>14</sup> To pastors and leaders who approach discipleship passively, Geiger, Kelley, and Nation issue the following warning: "The people you serve are either being joyfully transformed by Him, or they are miserably transforming into the gods they treasure."<sup>15</sup> Gospel transformation is the goal of discipleship.

Greg Ogden, author of *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time*, believes the church's discipleship "malaise" is the result of passively relying on programs to serve as the primary mode of discipleship.<sup>16</sup> Ogden argues that while programs may contribute to a person's spiritual development, they miss the central ingredient necessary for personal transformation: life on life discipleship. Ogden writes, "Unless disciples receive personal attention so that their particular growth needs are addressed in a way that calls them to die to self and live fully to Christ, a disciple will not be made."<sup>17</sup> True discipleship, as Ogden defines, is a process that takes place within accountable relationships over a period of time, for the purpose of bringing believers to spiritual maturity in Christ.<sup>18</sup> And yet, research shows the majority of evangelical congregations have no intentional plan of discipleship for people as they join, and no

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14. Eric Geiger, Michael Kelley, and Philip Nation, *Transformational Discipleship: How People Really Grow* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2012), 28.

15. Geiger, Kelley, and Nation, *Transformational Discipleship*, 63.

16. Greg Ogden, *Transforming Disciples: Making Disciples a Few at a Time* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 42.

17. Ogden, *Transforming Disciples*, 43.

18. Ogden, *Transforming Disciples*, 54.

deliberate space where character training can take place.<sup>19</sup> The church's lack of a plan for discipleship is a key argument for each of the missional authors presented here.

Secondly, in an attractional church, members are encouraged to participate in many of the activities of church life: corporate worship, Sunday school, small groups, and an occasional "outreach" project. Often, the goal to connect members to programs and other ministries is done with the hope that each of these ministries will bring personal transformation. Ogden argues that when congregations rely on programs, master-style teaching, and lectures to disciple people, they fall into the myth that disciples are made simply by having access to the right information. However, as the church has proven over the last several years, a "learning culture" does not necessarily translate into a "discipling culture."<sup>20</sup> Learning to lay down one's pride, respond with graciousness in the face of adversity, or deal with hidden anger, sadness, and other sins that lurk in every heart, doesn't happen in a group lecture or classroom environment. Congregations that foster a disciple-making environment value of a different kind of learning culture: one that teaches people how to apply the gospel to each area of life. As Geiger, Kelley, and Nation write: "The end result of discipleship is not merely the knowledge of all Jesus commanded, but the *obedience* to all Jesus commanded."<sup>21</sup>

In his book, *Building a Discipling Culture*, Mike Breen writes, "If you set out to build the church, there is no guarantee you will make disciples. It is far more likely that you will create consumers who depend on the spiritual services that religious

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19. Harrington and Patrick, *The Disciple Maker's Handbook*, 25.

20. Geiger, Kelley, and Nation, *Transformational Discipleship*, 20.

21. Geiger, Kelley, and Nation, *Transformational Discipleship*, 18, emphasis mine.



professionals provide.”<sup>22</sup> Breen observes that while the attractional church model communicates a highly welcoming and invitational environment, it often fails to cultivate the space where members are challenged to live into their new identity as sons or daughters of the King. He writes, “A gifted disciple is someone who invites people into a covenantal relationship with him or her, but challenges that person to live into his or her true identity in very direct yet graceful ways. Without both dynamics working together, you will not see people grow into the people God has created them to be.”<sup>23</sup>

Has the church become a place where members are equipped to challenge one another “in very direct yet graceful ways?” When the goal of discipleship is reduced to “information gathering” or “behavior modification,” members are left ill equipped to engage one another in gospel accountability, and even less equipped to engage a secular culture that holds very different worldviews. Each author above agrees that an inferior definition of discipleship and a passive Christian education model are obstacles that inhibit the gospel growth in members and flow of disciple-making. Their strong contention is that discipleship is an intentional process that best flourishes in life on life relationships where members are taught how to apply the gospel in everyday life.

### **The Leadership Landscape: Tending the Vine**

A congregation’s leadership plays a significant role in building a culture of discipleship. Missional authors identify a number of leadership dynamics that either enable or hamper an environment where discipleship flourishes. The first has to do with

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22. Breen, *Building a Discipling Culture*, 5.

23. Breen, *Building a Discipling Culture*, 15.

growth. Colin Marshall and Tony Payne observe leaders who place their primary focus on running the ministries of the church at the expense of overseeing the spiritual growth of their people are like gardeners that invest more attention on the trellis than the actual vine itself. They write:

The growth of the trellis is not the growth of the vine. We may multiply the number of programs, events, committees and other activities that our church is engaged in; we may enlarge and modernize our buildings; we may re-cast our regular meetings to be attractive and effective in communicating to our culture; we may congratulate ourselves that numbers are up. And all of these are good things! But if people are not growing in their knowledge of God's will so that they walk ever more worthily of the Lord...then there is no growth to speak of happening at all.<sup>24</sup>

While metrics such as worship attendance and financial performance can be important indicators of church health, they do not tell the most important story. Attendance and giving in themselves are poor indicators of a member's spiritual growth. The rapid rise of Americans who claim no religious affiliation is evidence that congregations need to establish a different standard of measurement.<sup>25</sup> Numerous missional authors challenge leaders to incorporate a new metric; one that measures engagement in life on life community that multiplies.<sup>26</sup> According to Marshall and Payne, this will involve a leader's "conscious shift away from building and maintaining structures" and an intentional move towards cultivating a climate that focuses on spiritual growth.<sup>27</sup>

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24. Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine: The Ministry Mind-shift That Changes Everything* (Youngstown, OH: Matthias Media Publishing, 2009), 82.

25. Pew Research Center, "The Changing Global Religious Landscape," April 5, 2017, accessed October 25, 2019, <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/>.

26. Carey Nieuwhof, "5 Reasons Why Engagement is the New Church Attendance," accessed October 25, 2019, <https://careynieuwhof.com/5-reasons-why-engagement-is-the-new-church-attendance/>.

27. Marshall and Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine*, 17.

Another significant influence that can interfere with building a discipling culture is the image a pastor presents to the congregation. When a pastor assumes the identity of a “service-providing clergyman” or “CEO”, Marshall and Payne believe they foster a consumer mindset by creating the impression that members are only there to receive rather than to give.<sup>28</sup> Conversely, when pastors present themselves as “trainer,” they are more aligned with Scripture’s teaching, and cultivate the understanding that members have both the “privilege and responsibility to prayerfully speak God’s Word to each other.”<sup>29</sup> In this environment, the gospel growth of each person in community is the focus, and the organizational structure is there to support the growth of the vine, not the other way around.

Marshall and Payne are not alone in their thinking. Thinking about the type of leadership that exists in most congregations today, Mike Breen observes how pastors have unwittingly fostered a consumer culture. He writes:

The problem is that most of us have been educated and trained to build, serve and lead the organization of the church. Most of us have actually never been trained to make disciples. Seminary degrees, church classes and training seminars teach us to grow our volunteer base, form system and organizational structures or preach sermons on Sunday mornings, and assimilate newcomers from the Sunday service.<sup>30</sup>

Tod Bolsinger sees something similar. Reflecting on the rapidly changing culture, Bolsinger adds that the majority of pastors were trained to lead a culture that no longer exists. He observes today’s pastors are not only called to teach, preach, and shepherd. In many cases, they are expected to cast a compelling vision, build a culture of discipleship,

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28. Marshall and Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine*, 95.

29. Marshall and Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine*, 99.

30. Mike Breen, *Building a Discipling Culture*, 11.

manage staff, and have necessary skills to lead a congregation through difficult change. Most significantly, it is common for pastors to be challenged with the awesome task of discipling others without ever having been discipled themselves.<sup>31</sup>

To reach a growing secular culture that has no biblical reference for “God,” and “sin,” these authors argue that a new kind of leadership is required; one that helps their congregations adapt and thrive in the midst of challenging and uncertain times. Bolsinger writes, “Traditional churches will only become missionary churches as those in authority (and even those without formal authority) develop capacity to lead their congregations through a long, truly transformational process that starts with the transformation of the leaders and requires a thoroughgoing change in leadership functioning.”<sup>32</sup> Adaptive leadership is a dramatic shift that goes beyond perfecting “best practices” or relying on prior experiences to solve difficult challenges. One of the first steps that an adaptive leader makes is to recognize a congregation’s transformation begins with a leader’s own transformation.<sup>33</sup> Instead of seeking to be an expert with all of the answers, an adaptive leader asks, how does a healthy organization adapt to a changing environment?<sup>34</sup> With intentional discipleship in mind, Bolsinger recasts the definition of leadership as: “energizing a community of people toward their own transformation in order to accomplish a shared mission in the face of a changing world.”<sup>35</sup> For Bolsinger, adaptive leaders possess the following qualities:

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31. Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 13.

32. Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 39.

33. Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 46.

34. Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 38.

35. Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 42.

1. The posture of a lifelong learner and commitment to their own transformation.
2. A clear sense of identity in Christ and of the mission to which he or she is called.
3. The humility to let go of being the “expert” with all of the answers, and instead lead a community of people in facing their biggest challenges together.
4. The resiliency and capacity to deal with resistance that comes from facilitating change in an organization.<sup>36</sup>

The leadership of a congregation has tremendous influence in cultivating a disciple-making environment. Missional authors implore churches to recognize that in order to reach a rapidly changing culture, a different kind of leadership is necessary. One that begins with a leader’s own transformation. When leaders see themselves as an “equipper” or “trainer” they are positioning themselves and their congregations to become lifelong learners of Jesus who make disciples. An adaptive leader focuses less on numerical and structural growth to measure effectiveness, and instead learns how to lead a community through their own gospel transformation.

## **Part Two: Shaping Disciples to Carry the Seed**

Despite all of the obstacles that exist in congregations today, missional authors remind us of the discipleship movement Jesus launched. It did not orbit a building or an institution, nor was it dependent on having the right committee structure or budget. The gospels and New Testament church demonstrate that the discipleship movement Jesus launched was built on relationships, where an identity in him was everything needed to empower his entire mission. Woodward and White write, “Movements are built on the smallest of seeds; the apple seed carries the potent power of the whole apple tree. Discipleship is the work of shaping disciples to carry the seed of the entire mission.”<sup>37</sup>

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36. See chapter three, “A Leadership Model,” in Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*.

37. Woodward and White, *The Church as Movement*, 89.

What kind of environment shapes disciples to carry the seed of God's mission? Following the pattern of Jesus and the early church, disciple-making congregations foster the gospel identity of each member in community in three important ways. They connect people to God, to one another, and the world in which they live.

### **Connecting People to God**

Christopher Wright, author of *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission*, believes disciples are shaped to carry the seed of mission when they begin to see their lives as a small part of God's greater story. Wright identifies the four major sections of the biblical story as Creation, Fall, Redemption in History, and New Creation, and believes the climate for gospel transformation is present when people allow the whole story of what God has done in history to completely reform them.<sup>38</sup> In fact, Wright argues one reason the early church experienced such explosive growth in the first century was because "first believers knew the story they were in."<sup>39</sup> He writes,

This was the story that the early followers of Jesus knew, and it was their confidence in this story, and the certainty that they had a part to play in it, that led them out into the world in mission. This is the story that we need to know we are part of. For our mission is nothing less (or more) than participating with God in this grand story until he brings it to its guaranteed climax.<sup>40</sup>

James Choung, author of *True Story: A Christianity Worth Believing In*, found that sharing God's story was an effective way to present the gospel and bring a "kingdom" perspective to a postmodern culture. He writes, "The gospel needs to sound

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38. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 39.

39. Wright, *The Mission of God's People*, 36.

40. Wright, *The Mission of God's People*, 36.

like the good news it really is instead of a static message concerned only with the afterlife, and thus divorced from everyday realities.”<sup>41</sup> In his book, Choung tells the story of God’s redemption with four pictures and simple phrases that illustrate how Christ’s redemption heals all the ways that sin has ruined creation. These simple phrases, “Designed for Good,” “Damaged by Evil,” “Restored for Better,” and “Sent Together to Heal” correspond to Wright’s four chapters referenced above.<sup>42</sup> To a culture that teaches the ultimate goal in life is individual happiness found through self-fulfillment, Choung’s presentation of the gospel seeks to emphasize the communal identity found in being on mission together.<sup>43</sup> Choung writes, “Though the biblical narrative has power in and of itself, it is more credible when told through a community of people who live authentically with Jesus, becoming more like him and loving others as he would.”<sup>44</sup>

Not everyone in the missional conversation is convinced that a kingdom-focused presentation of the gospel is comprehensive enough. With Wright and Choung, Keller agrees that the final result of Christ’s redeeming work will be a renewed heaven and earth, and when Christians work together for a community’s greater good, their actions are an important witness of God’s reign and rule in a secular world.<sup>45</sup> However, Keller expresses concern that using an overly corporate definition for “sin” and “salvation” fails

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41. James Choung, *True Story: A Christianity Worth Believing In* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 201, Kindle.

42. Choung, *True Story*, 214, Kindle.

43. Choung, *True Story*, 203, Kindle.

44. Choung, *True Story*, 203, Kindle.

45. Tim Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 291.

to call individuals to repentance, faith and obedience.<sup>46</sup> He writes, “In their view, sin is mainly the selfishness, pride, greed and violence that destroy community and God’s creation.”<sup>47</sup> Against an overly horizontal presentation of Christ’s reconciling and redemptive work, Keller argues that the classic doctrines of “sin” and “salvation” are necessary in order for individuals to grasp both the depth of their sin and the magnitude of Christ’s saving grace.<sup>48</sup> To further make his point, Keller references an article written by D.A. Carson who expresses similar concerns with a purely kingdom presentation of the Gospel. Carson writes,

Sin is not first and foremost horizontal, social – (though of course it is all of that): it is vertical, the defiance of Almighty God. The sin, which most consistently is said to bring down God’s wrath on the heads of his people or on entire nations, is idolatry – the de-godding of God. And it is the overcoming of this most fundamental sin that the cross and resurrection of Jesus achieve. The most urgent need of human beings is to be reconciled to God <sup>49</sup>

These authors argue that salvation is more than the adoption of a new set of values; it is about the radical change in one’s inner identity. Keller connects both the vertical and horizontal aspects of the gospel when he writes, “A Christian’s zeal for justice comes from a transformed identity that flows from a grasp of the gospel – a gospel proclaiming salvation is by faith alone, not by works.”<sup>50</sup>

Is it possible for a congregation to preach and teach the classic doctrines of faith and still be missional? Keller not only agrees that it is; he contends it is the call of every Christian and congregation. With a comprehensive, gospel-centered approach to ministry,

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46. Keller, *Center Church*, 268.

47. Keller, *Center Church*, 267.

48. Keller, *Center Church*, 271.

49. Keller, *Center Church*, 271.

50. Keller, *Center Church*, 271.



Keller challenges pastors and leaders to equip their congregations in the following three intentional ways:

1. To be a verbal witness to the gospel in their webs of relationships
2. To love neighborhoods and city
3. To integrate their faith with their work in order to engage culture through their vocations<sup>51</sup>

For each of these authors, contextualization of the gospel is critical to shaping disciples to carry the seed of God's mission. Disciple-making congregations preach and teach the classic doctrines of sin and salvation that invite an individual's repentance, faith and obedience. In addition, they tell the whole story of what God has done in history as a way of inviting new members in community to join his mission. Knowing, believing, and learning to live the gospel is at the heart of forming one's individual and communal identity.

### Growing in Gospel Identity

Learning to live a life that imitates Jesus is a lifelong journey that invites deep personal change. Throughout his life and ministry, Jesus demonstrated that the most significant part of being his disciple wasn't what they did or even what they accomplished, but rather who they were becoming.<sup>52</sup> Woodward and White write, "To embody our beliefs and work them out in real-time practice is at the soul of being a

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51. Keller, *Center Church*, 272.

52. Woodward and White, *The Church as Movement*, 74.

follower of Jesus.”<sup>53</sup> David Benner, author of *The Gift of Being Yourself: The Sacred Call of Self-Discovery*, reminds God’s people that, in the Fall, they were severed by sin from the true-self whom God created, and are now living by default in a fractured, false-self state.<sup>54</sup> In this condition, a person yearns for true intimacy – the kind of intimacy only God can provide – all while doubting God’s goodness and hiding vulnerabilities and perceived imperfections in shame. A failure to trust in God to meet a person’s deepest needs lies at the center of the false-self. Benner writes, “Everything that is false about us arises from our belief that our deepest happiness will come from living life our way, not God’s way. Although we may say we want to trust God and surrender to his will, deep down we doubt that God is really capable of securing our happiness.”<sup>55</sup>

Because the false-self believes a person’s value is dependent on what they have, what they can do, and what others think of them, they deceptively surround themselves with attachments such as gaining knowledge, mastering achievements, and acquiring material blessings.<sup>56</sup> These attachments are all empty ways of achieving an identity, and sadly set one up on a treadmill of performance.<sup>57</sup> Weighed down by responsibilities and obligations never meant for a child of God, the false-self clings to a carefully crafted, false identity rather than receive the gift freely offered in Christ – the true-self.<sup>58</sup>

The storms of life have a way of unmasking the emotions of the heart, revealing

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53. Woodward and White, *The Church as Movement*, 91.

54. David G. Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself; The Sacred Call to Self-Discovery* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004), 69.

55. Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself*; 812.

56. Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself*; 883.

57. Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself*; 948.

58. Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself*; 128, 948.

one's most sacred, hidden idols. It is only when the burdens of nurturing a false-self prove too much that the illusion and false security of attachments are exposed. Ruth Barton describes this important time in a person's life as "Time in the Wilderness," referring to the time when Moses sought solitude in the desert after committing murder.<sup>59</sup> An individual's time spent in solitude invites a crucial time of reflection that often leads to a newly found self-awareness of their sin. As a disciple comes face to face with their sinful self, God meets them in their brokenness. It is here where a person is invited to experience the forgiveness of a merciful God, and the process of transformation begins. Benner quotes theologian Basil Pennington when he writes, "If I were sinless, the perfect image of God, I could know a God of love. But knowing myself as the sinner enables me to know something more: a God of mercy – something greater, for love responds to what is good and lovable; mercy responds to what is not good and makes it good and lovable, the gift of being myself."<sup>60</sup>

Genuine gospel transformation occurs when a person's experience of God moves from an objective "knowing all about God" to a deep and personal experience of receiving his forgiveness. When this happens, disciples begin to see themselves as God sees them, a deeply loved child of God. In Christ, the false-self's identity is reformed and grounded around a relationship with the Father, becoming the true-self God created his people to be. Barton writes: "In the process of transformation the Spirit of God moves us from behaviors motivated by fear and self-protection to trust and abandonment to God; from selfishness and self-absorption to freely offering the gifts of the authentic self; from

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59. Ruth Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership: Seeking God in the Crucible of Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 39.

60. Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself*; 83, Kindle.

the ego's desperate attempts to control the outcomes of our lives to an ability to give ourselves over to the will of God which is often the foolishness of this world.”<sup>61</sup>

While both Benner and Barton highlight the importance “time in the wilderness” has on forming an individual's gospel identity, Woodward and White emphasize the effect an individual's transformation has when shared in close and trusted community. They write, “Healing and wholeness comes by confessing our sins both to God and one another. As we are aware of our brokenness and woundedness and share it with others, we cultivate an honest community in which true healing takes place.”<sup>62</sup> Growing in gospel identity is both an inward and outward journey. A disciple-making congregation recognizes the importance of cultivating an environment where each person's gospel identity has the chance to flourish in both individual and community settings.

### **Connecting People to One Another**

Numerous missional authors emphasize the important role that Christian community plays in forming one's gospel identity. Keller writes,

The gospel creates community. Because it points us to the One who died for his enemies, it creates relationships of service rather than selfishness. Because it removes both fear and pride, people get along inside the church who could never get along outside. Because it calls us to holiness, the people of God live in loving bonds of mutual accountability and discipline. Thus the gospel creates a human community radically different from any society around it.<sup>63</sup>

Keller and others understand that it is within the context of disciple-making community, individuals learn how to become a family on mission. Woodward and White observe one

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61. Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*, 16.

62. Woodward and White, *The Church as Movement*, 77.

63. Keller, *Center Church*, 311.

of Jesus' first acts in ministry was establishing a core group of people to invest in. They write, "His [Jesus'] primary way of creating movement was confiding in the three, training the twelve, and mobilizing the seventy."<sup>64</sup>

Bobby Harrington and Alex Absalom, authors of *Discipleship That Fits: The Five Kinds of Relationships God Uses to Help Us Grow*, believe there is a direct relationship between the size of the group that gathers and forming gospel identity. They observe Jesus used five main contexts, or relational settings, to disciple others, and note sociologists have long recognized the effect different sized gatherings have on influencing others toward a goal. They write, "If we can help provide contexts where people learn to better listen to Jesus and obey him, their journeys of faith will be deepened and our witness to the world strengthened."<sup>65</sup> A summary of their research is presented in Table 2 below.

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64. Woodward and White, *The Church as Movement*, 19.

65. Bobby Harrington and Alex Absalom, *Discipleship That Fits: The Five Kinds of Relationships God Uses to Help Us Grow* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 50.

Table 2. Five Contexts for Discipleship<sup>66</sup>

Context	Size	Focus	Learning	Church Expression	Outcomes
Public Context	100's	Engaging with an Outside Resource	Jesus and the crowds	Sundays	Inspiration "Momentum" Preaching
Social Context	20 -70	Sharing Snapshots that Build Affinity	Jesus and the 70	Missional Communities	Community Mission Practice
Personal Context	4-12	Revealing Private Information	Jesus and the 12	Small Groups	Closeness Support Challenge
Transparent Context	2-4	Living in Vulnerability and Openness	Jesus and the 3	Deepest Friendships & Marriage	Intimacy Openness Impact
Divine Context	Alone with God	Being with Your Creator and Redeemer	Jesus and the Father	Personal Walk	Identity Destiny Truth

While these authors are careful to note that discipleship takes place in each of the five contexts, they encourage pastors and leaders to become familiar with the strengths and weaknesses each relational setting offers in order to allow gospel identity to flourish. For example, they found the Public Space (most easily identified as a congregation's weekly worship service) was too large for genuine accountability to take place, and therefore should not be considered "the spiritual pinnacle" of a disciple's week.<sup>67</sup> They write, "In the Public space, we would do well to communicate that we are a big family of families."<sup>68</sup> This represents a major shift in thinking for most pastors and leaders who often invest the majority of their time, effort, and resources in planning Sunday's worship service.

66. Harrington and Absalom, *Discipleship That Fits*, 51.

67. Harrington and Absalom, *Discipleship That Fits*, 89.

68. Harrington and Absalom, *Discipleship That Fits*, 75.

Of the five main relational settings, Harrison and Absalom identify the Social Context as the most crucial space to develop within a disciple-making congregation. They write, “There is evidence to support that people develop a communal sense of identity in groups of 20 to 70 where genuine relationships are fostered in accountability, and people are comfortable to progress in intimacy at their own rate.”<sup>69</sup>

The relational dynamics that sociologists have discovered are actually a picture of the early church in action. In the first century, the primary building block of Roman society was the “oikos,” or network of relationships where people from several extended families and households experienced life together. New Testament writers reveal it was within this Social Context or “oikos” where individuals learned how to recognize and obey the voice of Jesus.<sup>70</sup> Harrington and Absalom write, “There is something enormously powerful about communities with a common mission that include people in various stages of their spiritual journey.”<sup>71</sup> While gospel-centered community can start up with any number of people present, they have found that the Social Context is the size in which such community formation naturally occurs. Yet, these authors argue, most congregations have not developed competencies in facilitating gatherings of this size, or developed strategies for forming disciples.<sup>72</sup>

Mike Breen has spent much of his adult life developing strategies for forming disciples in relationships that multiply. Early in his ministry, he observed that the conventional way of “being the church” wasn’t producing disciples in his own

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69. Harrington and Absalom, *Discipleship That Fits*, 111.

70. Harrington and Absalom, *Discipleship That Fits*, 105.

71. Harrington and Absalom, *Discipleship That Fits*, 108.

72. Harrington and Absalom, *Discipleship That Fits*, 109.

congregation. This led him to study how discipleship happened in the early church.

Breen observes that wherever Jesus went, he formed his disciples in a three-dimensional relational pattern of “Up, In, and Out,” as follows:

Up – with his Father

In – with his disciples

Out – with the hurting world around him.<sup>73</sup>

Breen believes when congregations cultivate this same integrative pattern of life that Jesus used for his own disciples, they are posturing themselves in the position of the early church, and therefore inviting people into the discipleship movement Jesus launched.

### **Building Spiritual Parents**

One of the strongest arguments that missional authors make is that to be a disciple is to be a disciple-maker. However, the move from disciple to disciple-maker takes time and mentoring. Woodward and White compare the process of learning to be a disciple-maker with learning how to climb a mountain. Just as an experienced guide helps prepare new climbers to thrive on the path ahead, new disciples who are learning to live with a gospel identity need someone to navigate the terrain of the discipleship journey. They write:

On a mountain climbing expedition, climbers must develop certain life-saving and life-giving skills for the trek ahead. Many people who hike the Himalayas are ordinary people with great passion and who underwent great preparation. No one wakes up one morning and decides to scale Everest that day. But more than that, it is the material credibility as the people of God.<sup>74</sup>

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73. Breen, *Building a Discipling Culture*, 115.

74. Woodward and White, Jr., *The Church as Movement*, 91.



LeRoy Eims, author of *The Lost Art of Disciple Making*, believes the church's greatest need is for dedicated, trained, and spiritually mature leaders to disciple others in their walk of faith.<sup>75</sup> Referencing the Apostle Paul's charge to "bring every one up to his full maturity in Christ," Eims argues that the congregation's most important work happens within the one-on-one discipleship relationship. Bob Rognlien, pastor and author of *Empowering Missional Disciples*, agrees that mentoring discipling relationships are extremely important in a congregation. Rognlien defines discipleship as "the process of raising up spiritual sons and daughters so they are empowered to live a fruitful life by following Jesus and reproducing their own spiritual sons and daughters."<sup>76</sup> Eims and Rognlien contend that the focus of a disciple-making congregation is to build up spiritual parents so that the number of active disciple-making members multiplies. Eims adds, "Without a real vision for the power of multiplication, a man will not stick with another person through thick and thin."<sup>77</sup>

While the multiplication of disciples and disciple-makers is extremely important, both authors caution against making multiplication the only goal and motivation for disciple-making. Remembering Jesus' method of cultivating his life in others, Eims and Rognlien call each "spiritual parent" to see people as Jesus does. Eims writes,

In addition to the vision for multiplication, the potential worker must have a heart for people. He must see others in light of their potential for God. Christians not only have a tremendous potential for God, they are also precious to God. They are his beloved children. He wants to see them develop and mature into responsible citizens in the kingdom of God whose lives please Him and bring Him glory.

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75. Leroy Eims, *The Lost Art of Disciple Making* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), 17.

76. Bob Rognlien, *Empowering Missional Disciples: An Introduction to 3D Movements* (Pawley's Island, SC: 3DM Publishing, 2016), 185.

77. Eims, *The Lost Art of Disciple Making*, 85.

Unless we see people in that light, we will tend to relegate them to some program that we hope will do the job for us.<sup>78</sup>

In his famous book, *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer wisely warns the church against idolizing any vision more than the community of people in which they are called to serve. He writes, “Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than they love the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest and sacrificial. God hates this wishful dreaming because it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious.”<sup>79</sup> For these missional authors, building spiritual parents and the multiplication of disciples are the natural response and overflow of a disciple who intentionally seeks to live a life that imitates Christ in all areas of life.<sup>80</sup>

Missional authors above demonstrate the importance of connecting people to one another in gospel-centered relationships where discipleship and character training can flourish. It is within the context of a trusted community that a person learns to hear and obey the voice of Jesus and apply the gospel in each area of life. In a disciple-making congregation, pastors and leaders build intentional plans of discipleship where members in gospel-centered community learn how to live a life that imitates Jesus and disciples others.

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78. Eims, *The Lost Art of Disciple Making*, 86.

79. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1954), 27.

80. Marshall and Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine*, 43.

## Connecting People to the World

“To be on mission is to live the rhythms of God’s love with those who don’t have it.”<sup>81</sup> Authentic community embodying the gospel is God’s design for his church.

However, being connected to God’s story in the context of a loving and challenging gospel-centered community does not end with the community itself. Missiologist and author Darrell Guder writes, “God’s mission calls and sends the church out in the power of the Gospel to be missionaries in every place we find ourselves.”<sup>82</sup> Disciples are shaped to carry the seed of God’s mission as they carry the gospel out into the world where they live, work, and play. For David Bosch, when the church shapes and equips people so that the gospel influences how they live in the world, they are demonstrating a counter-cultural way to live that invites gospel hope in a hurting world.<sup>83</sup>

Developing an awareness of how non-believers come to faith in Christ is an immensely important part of shaping disciples to carry the seed of God’s mission. Don Everts and Doug Schaupp, authors of *I Once Was Lost: What Postmodern Skeptics Taught Us About Their Path to Jesus*, identify particular thresholds or “landscapes” that a postmodern skeptic enters as they move along a path of faith.<sup>84</sup> They contend that trusting a Christian, rather than a message, was a pivotal first step in helping this postmodern generation come to Christ. Each subsequent stage centers on the person’s relational

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81. M. Scott Boren, *Missional Small Groups: Becoming a Community that Makes a Difference in the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2010), 34.

82. Darrell L. Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 24.

83. Keller, *Center Church*, 255.

84. Don Everts and Doug Schaupp, *Once I Was Lost: What Postmodern Skeptics Taught Us About Their Path to Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 18.

connection to others in community who are willing to make themselves available to walk through life's questions and struggles typical of spiritual formation. Most revealing, rather than selling a lifestyle, Christian virtue, or image to a new non-believing friend, Everts and Schaupp encourage disciples to see their role as introducing the person to Jesus himself, allowing the journey of gospel transformation to repeat itself once again.<sup>85</sup> Each of these authors contends that as the church reclaims the patterns of intentional discipleship set by Jesus and the early church, they will foster a disciple-making environment.

### Summary

Jesus' Great Commission makes it clear: disciple-making is the mission of every disciple and every congregation.<sup>86</sup> The passive Christian education model employed by most evangelical churches today has not cultivated an environment conducive to gospel formation or the multiplication of disciples. What kind of environment engages new church members on a path of discipleship that leads to disciple-making? Disciple-making congregations begin with the end in mind and see themselves as "an agent of God's mission to the world" and envision each new member in community as a "sent one."<sup>87</sup> They prioritize their life around the gospel growth of each person in community in three important ways: They connect people to God, to one another, and the world. Within the context of life on life relationships, new members are taught to hear and obey the voice of

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85. Everts and Schaupp, *Once I Was Lost*, 51.

86. Matthew 28:16-20.

87. Hirsch, *Forgotten Ways*, 82.

Jesus, and learn how to apply the gospel to their everyday lives. Finally, congregations that cultivate a disciple-making environment have intentional plans of discipleship in place to build Spiritual Parents who are invited and encouraged to join the journey of discipling others. Bobby Harrington and Josh Patrick powerfully articulate the vision for disciple-making communities when they write,

Imagine a day when Jesus-style disciple-making is the norm for the local church. Everyday Christians are engaged with relationships with people (inside and outside the church) so that they can show the love of Jesus and help people to trust and follow him. Churches are known as disciple-making places, where Jesus-like people are created. And pastors are evaluated by the people they raise up and the disciple-makers they have made in the Spirit's power. Jesus' message *and* Jesus' methods dominate.<sup>88</sup>

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88. Bobby Harrington and Josh Patrick, *The Disciple Maker's Handbook*, 179, emphasis in original.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### PROJECT DESIGN

#### **Discipleship Begins at “Hello”**

People join a church for a variety of reasons. It has been my experience that very few people expressly join a church for the purpose of becoming a disciple-maker. Following Christ’s Great Commission and mandate, how may pastors and leaders influence prospective members to desire the highest calling Jesus gives to every Christian? Francis Chan writes, “Making disciples is far more than a program. It is the mission of our lives. It defines us. A disciple is a disciple-maker.”<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this project is to design a new member process then study its impact on encouraging a life of discipleship. As expressed in earlier chapters, when a person joins a congregation, there is a rare opportunity to invest in that individual’s spiritual formation and discipleship life. While churches use a variety of ways to orient new members, many congregations are using a new member orientation designed for a culture that no longer exists.<sup>2</sup> Following Christ’s Great Commission, are these methods of introduction effectively equipping people to live their Christian faith outside of church walls?

The project is designed to answer the question, “What kind of orientation will influence an individual toward a life of discipleship and disciple-making?” In light of my

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1. Bobby Harrington and Josh Patrick, *The Disciple Maker’s Handbook: 7 Elements of a Discipleship Lifestyle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 11.

2. Cary Nieuwhof, “6 Disruptive Church Trends That Will Rule 2017,” accessed October 26, 2019, <https://careynieuwhof.com/6-disruptive-church-trends-that-will-rule-2017/>.

study of discipleship within the missional church and with information gathered from new members, I have sought to design a new member orientation that serves as a launch into a life of disciple-making. In this chapter, I will discuss the previous format, the design process and new format, the metrics used to determine effectiveness, and finally what I have learned through this process.

### **Previous Format**

For decades, First Presbyterian Church (FPC) Greenville has used a traditional approach to welcome people into membership. If a person was joining FPC from another Presbyterian denomination, they could merely “transfer their membership” which required no orientation at all. Those interested in joining the church by reaffirming their faith or those coming from a congregation outside of a Presbyterian denomination attended an informal, one-time, one-hour class led by a pastor. This process lacked transformational content and was designed to help people find a place within the church rather than focusing on an individual’s spiritual development. The lack of investment in people as they joined has most likely contributed towards a large number of “inactive” members.<sup>3</sup> Eventually, leadership recognized the need for a change to the new member process.

In “attractional church” style, a Membership Development Director was hired in late 2004 for the primary purpose of welcoming and assimilating visitors into membership and ministry. On December 1, 2004, a new class format was introduced called “First Look” which met for three consecutive weeks during the Sunday school hour. An outline of each session is listed below:

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3. See Appendix A for Membership Statistics Report.

Week One: What Christians Believe – a presentation of the Gospel

Week Two: What Presbyterians Believe – an overview of the Reformed faith and a brief presentation on Presbyterian polity.

Week Three: Ministries of the Church – an overview of ministries and programs the church had to offer.

With this new process, prospective new members were required to attend all three classes, regardless of their former church affiliation. At the end of the third session, participants who expressed an interest in joining the church completed a membership card that included space to summarize their individual faith in Christ. On occasion, this summary of a person's faith was reviewed to recruit members for an introductory course on Christianity called The Alpha Course. However, in most cases, the information collected upon joining served no other purpose in helping that individual grow spiritually.

During the third week, prospective new members were invited to sign up to volunteer or receive more information for the myriad ministries the church had to offer. Meaningful engagement in ministry was largely dependent on lay volunteers' responsiveness to connect with new members and therefore, actual connections to ministry were sporadic. To solve the connection "problem," the church eventually hired an additional staff person to serve as volunteer coordinator. The volunteer coordinator's main responsibilities were to recruit members for various roles to run programs and help out with an occasional mission project. However, despite the addition of a new staff person and a steady influx of new members, there always seemed to be more volunteer positions than available volunteers to run various ministries. Meanwhile, without connection or meaningful engagement, new member retention suffered, resulting in an increase of inactive members.



While “First Look” was an improvement over the previous process, the orientation had several inherent limitations. First, the class itself met during the Sunday school hour – one of the most opportune times for new people to make connections within the congregation. If people were already connected to a Sunday school class or Bible study, and wanted to join the church formally, they were expected to miss the class for three consecutive weeks to attend the new member orientation. Secondly, by offering the orientation during the Sunday school hour, the length of the class was limited on time, usually 45 to 50 minutes. Because the format lent itself to a “lecture” style, there were limited opportunities for participants to respond to the material being presented or have an opportunity to interact with one another. Finally, there was no intentional plan of discipleship for people as they join. Participants simply attended the series of classes, were encouraged to participate in the congregation’s ministries and activities, and met with the Session to be received into membership.

From 2001 to 2016, annual Session reports indicate that the church received 2,595 new members over the fifteen-year period. However, during this same period, the report also reveals that overall church membership declined by 38.9% due to the number of inactive members who were eventually moved off the rolls. These membership statistics reveal that discipleship must be more than distributing well-prepared packets of information on doctrinal beliefs and inviting people to participate in worship and programs. The former process to orient and assimilate new members lacked vision and purpose and did not serve as a connection to meaningful ministry. It became clear that the church needed a radical reevaluation of new member ministry.

## The Design Process

In December 2015, I joined the pastoral team of First Presbyterian Church in Greenville, SC to serve in the area of new member discipleship and women's ministries. Being a new person on staff, I had the opportunity to view each area of discipleship with fresh eyes. I began to dream about a new focus to the class that would ultimately stimulate discipleship and began to ask several questions: Was it possible to align a new member orientation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century with the way that Jesus and the early church formed disciples in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century? How might an orientation begin to invest in a person's spiritual formation and woo them to want to grow as a disciple?

Woodward and White teach that a deeper and more formational learning happens in an environment where individuals have time to process new information on three levels. They write, "Formational learning involves more than passing along information or increasing intelligence. Formational learning is passionate about the active shaping of our minds (meta-learning), our souls (reflective learning), and our bodies (experiential learning)."<sup>4</sup> While the previous new member orientation sought to be both informational and instructional, it did not incorporate a time for reflective or experiential learning. Was it possible to include meta, reflective, and experiential learning in one orientation? If so, what elements or aspects of discipleship would contribute to this kind of learning?

To further guide the design process, I considered the following questions, themes, and goals. The first was to envision each prospective new member as a "sent one."<sup>5</sup> The vision helped to keep the goal of disciple-making and multiplication in clear focus.

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4. J. R. Woodward and Dan White, Jr., *Church as Movement: Starting and Sustaining Missional Communities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 16.

5. Alan Hirsch, *Forgotten Ways: Reactivating Apostolic Movements* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011), 82.

Second, I wanted to incorporate the understanding that church membership was not an end goal in and of itself, but a new beginning and opportunity for spiritual growth. Third, I wondered if it was possible for an orientation to address some of the important concerns raised by TAG Consulting, as identified in chapter one of this thesis-project.<sup>6</sup> Fourth, what goals and metrics would best determine effectiveness? Finally, I aimed to design an orientation that would be easily replicated, enabling the focus to remain on the individuals in attendance, and less about the logistics of running an event or program. Each of these questions and themes began to shape the process that eventually led to a revised new member orientation called “New Member Weekend.”

### **New Member Weekend**

After a season of careful planning, we launched the first New Member Weekend in September of 2016. We chose a weekend format for the main benefit of additional time. Meeting three times over one weekend not only tripled the amount of available time together, it promised a more relaxed and “retreat like” setting where participants could experience a new way of “being” the church from the beginning.

Second, the additional time that a weekend format allows would enable a number of elders, deacons, and lay leaders to participate. Because disciple-making happens in the context of community, I wanted to create the time and space to include a representation from the wider church community. The presence and participation of elders, deacons, and lay leaders would communicate a high level of commitment from leadership.

Third, attending a weekend retreat would require a significant investment of time from prospective new members themselves. In an article entitled “The Main Reason

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6. The TAG Report Summary can be found in Appendix B.

People Leave a Church,” Thom Rainer encourages leaders to “raise the bar” when it comes to setting standards for church membership.<sup>7</sup> An individual or family’s time is a precious commodity in today’s culture. Their attendance and participation over a weekend would demonstrate a commitment to exploring membership and a willingness to engage with a new community.

Finally, and most significantly, a weekend format would allow time to follow the integrative pattern of “Up, In, and Out” that Jesus used to form his own disciples.<sup>8</sup> As argued in chapters two and three of this thesis, one’s gospel identity is formed in the integrative pattern of connecting people to God (Up), to one another (In), and to the world (Out). In this new orientation, I wanted participants to experience what it is like for a community to gather, fellowship, worship, learn, grow, and be “sent” or commissioned, only to gather once again. Each element of the weekend was designed to inspire a new member’s next steps toward engagement into life on life community as follows:

Becoming the Community Gathered, Presenting a Contextualized Gospel, and Intentional Plan of Discipleship.

### **Becoming the Community Gathered**

Authentic community embodying the gospel is God’s design for his church. Creating an environment where participants begin to experience being a part of “the community gathered” is the first important aim of this project. However, one of the most

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7. Thom S. Rainer, “The Main Reason People Leave a Church,” January 21, 2013, accessed October 26, 2019, <https://thomrainer.com/2013/01/the-main-reason-people-leave-a-church/>. In this article, Thom Rainer encourages leaders to “raise the bar” when it comes to setting high standards for church membership.

8. Mike Breen, *Missional Community Leader Guide* (Pawley’s Island, SC: 3 Dimension Ministries, 2013), 12.

challenging aspects for people in a large church is becoming a part of an existing community. Church leader Carey Nieuwhof identifies the “lack of community” as a top reason people become disillusioned within the church and eventually leave.<sup>9</sup> I have certainly found this to be true in my context. Yet establishing a sense of community is not only important for the reason of making newcomers feel welcome. Christian community is the vehicle God chose to shape disciples to become disciple-makers. Tim Keller writes, “Christian community is more than just a supportive fellowship; it is an alternate society. And it is through this alternate human society that God shapes us into who are what we are. Jesus says that the main way people will believe that Christians have found the love of God is by seeing the quality of their life together in community.”<sup>10</sup>

Time constraints interfered with this aspect of fostering fellowship in the previous format. However, time and space for cultivating relationships are given priority in the revised orientation. For example, in the first session, a number of elders, deacons, and lay leaders are in attendance to welcome guests as they arrive. The evening opens with prayer, and participants are invited to share a casual meal around tables. Mike Breen writes, “Meals are the place where everyone has to put their weapons down.”<sup>11</sup> As simple times of fellowship are shared and people engage in casual conversation, guards come down, relationships are cultivated, and connections are made. Placing an emphasis on community from the beginning helps set the stage for engaging in life on life, gospel-centered community as a part of the joining process.

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9. Carey Nieuwhof, “5 Reasons People Have Stopped Attending Your Church (Especially Millennials),” accessed October 26, 2019, <https://careynieuwhof.com/5reasonsmillennials/>.

10. Timothy J. Keller, *Center Church: Doing Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 311.

11. Breen, *Missional Community Leader Guide*, 13.

## **Presenting a Contextualized Gospel**

Presenting a contextualized gospel is the second aim of this project. Greenville has experienced rapid growth over the last several years and frequently appears in popular news journals as a “top ten place to live.”<sup>12</sup> With the increase in population, it is becoming increasingly common to meet people who are unfamiliar with Christianity or have become disillusioned with the church. Keller writes, “The missional church, if it is to reach people in a post-Christian culture, must recognize that most of our more recently formulated and popular gospel presentations will fall on deaf ears.”<sup>13</sup> As I was preparing curriculum for this project and thought about the growing secular population in Greenville, I thought about ways to present the gospel to people who may have no biblical context for God, sin, salvation, and grace. How might the gospel message become compelling and relevant to them? With this question in mind, I decided to weave the gospel message into each session of the weekend, as follows: One Man’s Story, God’s Story, and Identity in Christ’s Family.

### **One Man’s Story; Your Faith Story**

On the first night, our senior pastor shares his own personal story of coming to faith in Christ. He speaks about his life before knowing Jesus and shares how the transforming love of Christ began to work in his own heart and in his relationships with others. Hearing the gospel presented personally through the lens of one man’s story not

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12. Maayan Schechter and Eric Connor, “Greenville named fourth fastest-growing U.S. city,” May 25, 2017, accessed October 26, 2019, <https://www.greenvilleonline.com/story/news/2017/05/25/greenville-named-fourth-fastest-growing-u-s-city/344009001/>. Elizabeth LaFleur, “Greenville is 10th best place to live in the US, according to Livability,” March 5, 2019, accessed October 26, 2019, <https://www.greenvilleonline.com/story/news/2019/03/05/greenville-10th-best-place-live-u-s-according-livability/3063788002/>.

13. Tim Keller, *Center Church*, 272.

only helps participants know one person at a deeper level, it also sets the stage to talk about each person's own faith story and journey with Christ. For example, as the evening comes to a close, participants are reminded that they too have a story, and are encouraged to reflect on their own relationship with God by answering the following question:

*How would you characterize your current relationship with God (Check one or more.)*

\_\_\_\_\_ *Just getting started.*

\_\_\_\_\_ *Vibrant at one time, distant for a period, desiring a closer walk again.*

\_\_\_\_\_ *Deeply devoted while understanding my great need of Him.*

\_\_\_\_\_ *Other (please explain)*

Ending the first session with reflective questions on each individual's faith journey sends an important message. The focus of the weekend is less about gathering information on doctrine and church ministries through classroom instruction, and more about an opportunity for an individual to consider their own relationship and identity in Christ.

### God's Story

In the second session, the gospel is presented in the context of God's story: Creation, Fall, Redemption, and New Creation.<sup>14</sup> For the majority of people in attendance, this will be the first time they have heard the gospel presented as a part of God's redemptive story, or have been invited to see its connection to their own life. As the doctrines of sin, salvation, and grace are presented, people are once again given time to reflect on their relationship with Christ. However, this time they are invited to see their

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14. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 39.

lives in light of God's grand narrative and powerful, providential hand. It is my hope that by hearing the gospel presented in the context of God's larger story, participants will see God as a Missional God, allowing God's big story to shape and inspire the way they live, even joining him on mission.

### Identity in Christ's Family

In the final session, the gospel is presented in the context of Christ's family. Choung's four phrases with pictures are used to demonstrate the way disciples live out their hope and healing together in a broken and hurting world.<sup>15</sup> This last way of presenting the gospel is meant to show that Christ's Commission is not merely an individual mission but a corporate one. When a person belongs to Jesus, they belong to a family. As Christians learn to live as a family on mission, they become an important witness of God's reign and rule in a secular world.

Each gospel presentation ends with an invitation to grow wherever individuals find themselves. Woven throughout each of these gospel presentations is the important understanding that disciples are formed in gospel-centered community. By presenting the gospel in a variety of contexts, it is my hope that the disciple-making seeds to carry God's mission are planted.

### Intentional Plan of Discipleship

The third aim for this project is to invite and encourage prospective new members

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15. James Choung, *True Story: A Christianity Worth Believing In* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 214, Kindle. The four phrases that are referenced are "Designed for Good, Damaged by Evil, Restored for Better, and Sent Together to Heal," and together illustrate a community's response to living out God's story.



to complete a discipleship plan that includes joining a life on life community. One compelling argument in the missional conversation is that the church in Christendom has failed to operate with a clear definition for the term “disciple” or establish discipleship goals for their members.<sup>16</sup> However, discipleship is far more than attending a worship service, learning all about the gospel, and non-sacrificial serving or giving. The goal of discipleship is nothing less than transformation.<sup>17</sup>

In the previous process, the word “disciple” was not discussed, defined or emphasized. New members were not given an opportunity to share their faith story or journey as they joined, nor were they encouraged to put together a personal plan of discipleship. In the new design, throughout the weekend, each presenter introduces themselves as a “disciple of Jesus Christ” and affirms that a disciple is one whose life is continually rooted and shaped in the gospel as he or she learns to live it out in all areas of life.

At the end of the weekend, those who are ready to move from “visitor” status to “family member” have an opportunity to sign up to meet with an elder, deacon, or pastor. At this meeting, individuals share both their faith journey (where they have been) and intentional plan of discipleship (how they plan to grow).<sup>18</sup> These one-on-one meetings are designed to be special times of fellowship where prospective new members have an opportunity to be known, share their spiritual journey to date, and receive encouragement to engage in at least one area of life on life community where discipleship may flourish.

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16 Eric Geiger, Michael Kelley, and Philip Nation, *Transformational Discipleship: How People Really Grow* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2012), 18.

17. Geiger, Kelley, and Nation, *Transformational Discipleship*, 47.

18. Throughout the weekend, numerous life on life discipleship communities are presented. During their meeting with an elder, deacon, or pastor, prospective new members have the opportunity to discuss, ask questions, and choose a life on life community to visit.

It is my hope that by incorporating an intentional plan of discipleship into the joining process, we will position each new member for the kind of gospel growth that leads to disciple-making.

### Life Connections

Thus far, the argument has been that discipleship that leads to disciple-making can flourish when connections to gospel-centered community are made early in the joining process. However, a major criticism of the previous joining process was the lack of follow-up after new members joined. In the new format, a group of lay leaders from the Life Connections Committee meet after each New Member Weekend to ensure connections to life on life ministries are made.<sup>19</sup> Timely connections and follow-up are a crucial part of the joining process.

### New Member Reunion

Approximately six months after joining, we invite each new member to attend a “New Member Dessert.” The purpose of the evening is to check in after a reasonable amount of time has passed, and to ensure new members are becoming meaningfully engaged in some smaller community within the church. Members of a Sunday Life Group or Missional Community often host these events, which serve as another point of connection for new and existing members.

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19. The Life Connections Committee is made up of elders, deacons, and lay members who oversee the Christian education ministries of FPC.

## **Metrics of Success**

The purpose of my research is to discover the impact that this revised new member orientation has on an individual's engagement into life on life ministry within the church. As one method of research, I initially planned to conduct focus groups using a sample of willing participants from six New Member Weekends. However, this method of research required signed consent forms from each willing participant. Soon after the project began, I realized that obtaining individually signed consent forms from participants in six new member classes was going to be a challenge. Therefore, I limited the sample size to a more manageable number and chose to conduct research through an anonymous survey and with statistics obtained through the church's database.

## **Anonymous Survey**

The sample selected for this project consists of members who attended a New Member Weekend in February, April, or September of 2018. Six months after joining, each group of new members received a brief survey asking the questions as presented below. The responses received will be reviewed and analyzed in chapter five of this thesis-project.

Question 1: In what areas of discipleship are you currently engaged?

Question 2: Did attending the New Member Orientation influence this engagement?

Question 3: If so, in what ways?

## Worship Attendance and Discipleship Involvement

The second method of research used in determining effectiveness is attendance information for Sunday worship and weekly discipleship groups for the same six-month period. This information will be gathered from the church database. While not everyone signs in each week, this data should provide a measurable benchmark indicating an individual's worship attendance and involvement in a variety of discipleship groups. My analysis will include any observable correlation between attending a new member weekend and the impact it has had on worship and discipleship engagement.

### Possible Outcomes

If successful, the revised new member orientation will begin to shape how disciples grow in my local context. As new members grasp the vision and movement of “being disciples of Jesus who make disciples,” the seeds of transformation will be planted.<sup>20</sup> However, this kind of change will not happen overnight. As expressed numerous times in earlier chapters, spiritual growth is not primarily an intellectual exercise. Programs do not disciple people; people disciple people. It is my hope this project will demonstrate that discipleship formation flourishes in a relational environment where the gospel is presented and demonstrated as people are connected to other growing disciples as they are joining.

Second, I am hopeful that a new member orientation with a missional focus will inspire change in how leadership views their respective roles in ministry. In this project design, elders and deacons play an important role in the new member discipleship

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20. Bobby Harrington and Josh Patrick, *The Disciple Maker's Handbook: 7 Elements of a Discipleship Lifestyle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 19.

process. Learning how to engage with a new member as he or she shares their faith journey requires practice, training, and a teachable heart. When leaders begin to identify themselves as disciple-makers as opposed to “governors of programs,” my hope is that they too will join the discipleship movement.

Third, I believe a missional new member orientation will invite further opportunity to reassess each of the delivery channels for discipleship in my context. As both lay and ministry staff leaders catch the movement of Jesus’ disciple-making, I believe they will ask critical questions of the current discipleship model. For instance, do the traditional Sunday school and Life Group models build the kind of disciple-making culture that invites gospel growth and accountability? Finally, by engaging new members in gospel-centered community as members join, I am optimistic that the number of inactive members will decrease substantially over time.

### **Implementation and Things I Have Learned**

I have learned a great deal in the process of implementing this project. Introducing change in a traditional church that thrives on well-run, efficient programs is no small challenge, and practically speaking there were a number of logistics to work out. I prepared curriculum and presented the new format to our executive pastor. Quarterly New Members Weekends were chosen and reserved on the church calendar. We formed a new member subcommittee to help facilitate the weekend and engage in follow-up after members joined. I chose members from ministry staff and lay leadership to participate as appropriate to the material being presented, and a schedule was developed for elder and deacon participation. In each of these tasks, I learned the importance of influencing

others toward a goal that was not yet a common goal.

## Leadership

A successful implementation required buy-in and engagement from leadership. Not every leader was excited to attend new member dinners or meet with prospective members to share their faith journey. Several leaders were content with the former model of orienting new members and implementing a New Membership Weekend meant extra time and effort on their part. Consequently, being ready to cast the right vision with leaders about their new shepherding role in the discipleship process was another significant challenge. I had numerous one-on-one conversations with leaders about their concerns, which gave me the opportunity to practice adaptive leadership skills. For example, in the early days of implementation, I noticed that some leaders appeared more comfortable in helping with logistics and less willing to engage in relationships with members as they were joining. I believe, in part, this is because we have taught our leaders to see themselves as committee chairs and ministry leaders rather than shepherds or disciple-makers. As elders and deacons gained experience in meeting with new members and connections were made, leaders have become increasingly more comfortable in their new role in the revised new member discipleship process. In the process, I have learned the importance of ongoing leadership training, good communication, frequent follow-up, and the humility to recognize that we all have much to learn regarding discipleship and disciple-making.

## **Participants**

The participants themselves have also taught me a great deal in this process. I have discovered that people are generally eager to learn and do what is required of them to join the church. There was very little push back from participants with regards to investing their time, preparing their faith story, and meeting with leadership. Numerous times individuals have remarked that they have never been asked to write out their faith story or share their spiritual journey with someone. Many have expressed their appreciation for the investment made to help them begin well. This process has taught me that individuals are hungry to grow, and that there is an enormous need for spiritual parents who will invest time in the lives of others. However, time will tell if this process is a launch into true discipleship that leads to disciple-makers.

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, the goal of this project is to inspire individuals to become life-long learners of Jesus who join his mission of disciple-making. Attending a New Member Weekend is not the goal. Joining the church is not the goal. Both of these are vehicles through which disciples begin their journey of gospel transformation with a community of people to impact the world with the gospel. The mission to “make disciples” is God’s mission, and the church is his chosen instrument.

What kind of environment engages new members on a path of discipleship that leads to disciple-making? It has been my contention that as congregations reclaim the pattern of intentional discipleship demonstrated by Jesus, they will foster a disciple-making environment that grows disciples. A new member orientation will foster the

gospel growth in each person as they connect people to God, to one another and to the world in which they live. Discipleship begins at “hello.”



## CHAPTER FIVE

### OUTCOMES AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of my research is to observe the impact of a revised new member course and to measure the influence of that course on an individual's engagement into a life of discipleship. Specifically, I am most interested to learn if the revised new member orientation has served as an “on ramp” or “point of entry” into a particular area of life on life ministry. In this chapter, I will analyze available data and compare results.

The first New Member Weekend took place in September of 2016. Since that time, we have facilitated eleven New Member Weekends, as shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3. New Member Weekends 2016-2019

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<b>Date</b>	<b># Attended</b>	<b># Joined</b>
September 2016	21	19
November 2016	28	24
January 2017	26	16
April 2017	43	43
July 2017	27	26
October 2017	26	20
February 2018	51	47
April 2018	32	29
September 2018	57	51
February 2019	52	49
May 2019	27	25
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>390</b>	<b>349</b>

#### **Selected Sample and Research**

The following research analyzes results from the February, April, and September 2018 New Member Weekends. Over this period, 140 adults attended a New Member

Weekend and 127 adults subsequently joined the church. To test my hypothesis, two methods of research were used and are now presented and analyzed below. The first section reports and analyzes results from an anonymous survey that included three research questions and space for a participant's additional comments. The second section reports and analyzes worship and discipleship information for all 127 members, obtained from the church's database. At the end of each section, I offer preliminary observations and analysis. In the final section, I provide a summary of key observations, outcomes and conclusions.

### **Survey Analysis**

Six months after joining, each member from the selected sample received a cover letter and an anonymous survey asking the following three research questions:

- Q1: In what areas of discipleship are you currently engaged?
- Q2: Did the new member orientation influence this engagement?
- Q3: If so, in what ways?<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the questions listed above, the survey included a space for an individual's additional comments regarding the joining and assimilating process. I chose to conduct this simple survey through regular, standard mail for two reasons. First, a small minority from the selected sample does not routinely utilize email. Second, the sample includes married couples that utilize a single email address, which would make analyzing individual data more difficult. It is highly probable that using regular mail to conduct this project resulted in fewer responses. For the sake of consistency, I determined that regular mail was the preferable option. Additionally, although a number of other questions would

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1. See Appendix D for a copy of the referenced letter and discipleship survey. Each participant received a separate letter and survey regardless of address. As an example, a married couple living at the same address received two individual letters and surveys.

have been of interest to the Life Connections Committee, and to me in particular, the survey questions focused on the subject of discipleship and an individual's connection to particular areas of discipleship.

Of 127 possible participants, 24 individuals, or 19%, completed and returned the survey by the requested date. Each of the three research questions sought to explore the relationship between the new member orientation and a subsequent engagement in an area of discipleship. A summary table of the survey results is found in Appendix D.

Question #1:  
In What Areas of Discipleship Are You Currently Engaged?

When participants were asked about their connection to specific areas of discipleship, 22 individuals, or 91.6%, indicated engagement with at least one area of discipleship. Stated another way, only two individuals, or 8.4%, indicated they are not presently engaged in any area of discipleship. Of note, I intentionally did not define or explain the meaning of “areas of discipleship” in the cover letter and survey itself, as not to inhibit a participant's response. I found it interesting that no one asked for more information or clarification. As such, the surveys reflect a wide variety of answers. Responses are categorized numerically in Table 4 below.

Table 4. 2018 New Member Weekends Survey Responses Question #1

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<b>Responses</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>%</b>
Weekly Bible Studies	14	58
Sunday Life Groups (formerly “Sunday school”)	12	50
Worship Services	10	42
Serving in some capacity	9	37.5
Missional Communities	5	21
Leadership Training	4	17
Choir, Orchestra, Praise Team	3	12.5

### **Preliminary Observations to Question #1**

#### **1. Low Number of Completed Surveys Received**

As mentioned above, it is highly probable that using regular mail to conduct the survey resulted in fewer survey responses (19% of the selected sample). However, of the 24 completed surveys, the number of affirmative responses to Question #1 is high, (91.6%). It is logical to assume that those already active in discipleship are more likely to complete a survey regarding their own engagement in discipleship, but it is possible that other factors contributed to the favorable response rate. These include time spent exploring discipleship during the orientation, the elder/deacon meeting to share their faith story, and the invitation to prepare an intentional plan of discipleship. Each of these elements in the new member orientation may have influenced a participant’s engagement and positive response to Question #1.

#### **2. Multiple Areas of Discipleship**

The most common responses to Question #1 were weekly Bible studies and Sunday Life Groups, the most traditional forms of discipleship offered at FPC. However,

the majority of responses named two or more areas of ministry engagement. Of the 22 affirmative responses, 20 participants, or 91%, named more than one area of engagement, and most identified the areas of discipleship by name. For example, in response to Question #1, one participant wrote, “Grace Sunday School class, attend Wednesday mid-day Bible study, Part of a Missional Community group (Paris Mtn. area); Did six sessions of Leadership Training; Did training in Life & Light ministry).”<sup>2</sup> Only three individuals named one area of engagement. These results are likely a function of FPC’s longstanding “attractional church” ethos, which has historically encouraged broad participation across a number of programs and ministries. Without other information, such as age demographics, it is difficult to draw further conclusions.

### 3. The Relationship between Worship and Discipleship

Ten participants, or 41.6%, listed Sunday morning worship as an area of discipleship. In each case, respondents included other areas of discipleship such as Sunday Life Groups or weekly Bible studies in addition to attending worship. While it is highly probable that other survey respondents are engaged in regular worship, they didn’t list it as a response to this question. I thought it was significant that ten individuals identified worship as one place they engage in discipleship. In a culture that values solo activities, attending worship is often seen as a separate activity. In a disciple-making culture, disciples identify themselves as “disciples who worship” as opposed to perceiving worship as a separate activity altogether.

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2. Leadership Training – The participant is referring to a new elder leadership training ministry offered to anyone in the congregation who is seeking discernment on becoming an elder or deacon. Life & Light Ministry – The Life & Light Ministry is devoted to promoting sanctity of life issues by partnering with a local agency that cares for women in all stages of an unplanned pregnancy.

#### 4. The Relationship between Serving and Discipleship

Nine members, or 37.5%, answered the question by naming their involvement in some area of service. These included various areas of serving inside and outside the walls of FPC. The most common responses were serving in FPC children's ministry and/or with Hollis Academy.<sup>3</sup> Once again, without age demographics or other family information, it is difficult to offer other observations.

#### 5. Missional Community

Five new members, or 21%, indicated their involvement within a Missional Community.<sup>4</sup> Given the fact that Missional Communities are a relatively new ministry at FPC and are not yet broadly established within the life of the church, I was pleased with these statistics. The results may be a reflection of time spent during the weekend to introduce the concept of "family on mission" as well as asking representatives from a few existing Missional Communities to share their own experience of being in one. It is also noteworthy that those who are engaged in a Missional Community do not indicate their involvement in numerous other areas of discipleship.

#### 6. Life on Life Discipleship

Not every ministry or area of engagement listed by survey participants can be considered true "life on life" discipleship. For instance, there are a number of weekly Bible studies and Sunday Life Groups where the focus of the gathering is on teaching and

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3. Hollis Academy is a local elementary school that FPC has adopted as a churchwide mission. FPC members serve as room parents in each grade, mentor children weekly in reading and math, and provide 100 backpacks of food each weekend during the school year.

4. Missional Communities are further defined on page 96.

the class is led from the front with little time for discussion, community formation, or opportunities for shared accountability. While it was not within the scope of this project to create additional discipleship vehicles, the lack of life on life discipleship with which to connect members is a significant project limitation.

## 7. Inconclusive Answers

Not every response was determinable. For example, one participant's response to Question #1 was "Communication with Sunday school lesson." It is not clear if this member is merely receiving regular communication from a particular Sunday school or is actively engaged with a group of people in a Sunday Life Group. To this same question, another participant responded with "Missions." Again, it is not clear if the member is participating in a group that meets regularly as a "family on mission" or is financially supporting missions, or perhaps something in between.

### Question #2: Did the New Member Weekend Influence This Engagement?

The survey's second question sought to explore the relationship between a participant's experience in the new member orientation and an individual's subsequent action to pursue engagement in a particular area of discipleship. Nineteen participants, or 79% of survey participants, responded affirmatively and one communicated their intent to engage in ministry at a later date. Seven answered "yes" or "very much so" with no further comment, and four answered either "no," "not necessarily," or "not really." I have further categorized responses to Question #2 by subject below:

1. The new member orientation was informational:

“It was instrumental in pointing out all that is available.”

“Yes, it provided a cafeteria of options which I plan to expand over time.”

“Yes, we learned about the groups in the class.”

“Yes, everything presented was very helpful.”

“Yes, MC [Missional Community] group specifically.”

2. The new member orientation served as a source of encouragement to engage in discipleship:

“I would say it encouraged the engagement and also familiarized us with the variety of ministries.”

“Encouraged to be active in Sunday school.”

“Yes, we were encouraged to become involved in smaller groups within the church to develop personal relationships.”

“The orientation set the tone of personal engagement and encouraged all of us to reach out.”

3. One participant mentioned the one-on-one meeting with an elder in his/her response to Question #2:

“Yes, found SS class after meeting with [elder]; Missional Community connection; sang in choir for one year.”

4. Four participants stated the new member orientation did not influence their discipleship engagement:

“Not necessarily as I was already inclined to do so.”

“Not necessarily – was already engaged in most before joining.”

“Not really, though it was conducted in a very thorough way.”

“No.”

Question #3:  
If So, In What Ways?

In this last research question, participants were asked to provide a written answer explaining how the new member orientation influenced or did not influence their decision to engage in some area of discipleship. Of 24 possible responses, 18, or 75%, provided a comment to this particular question. As above, I have categorized responses to Question



#3 by subject below and several responses are similar to answers provided in Question #2:

1. The new member orientation provided information on specific ways to be involved within the church.

“We were given suggestions on which Sunday school would work for us.”

“Information provided was thorough and encouraging.”

“Learned about the MC [Missional Communities] groups and are enjoying one near our home.”

“In ways I would not have known about.”

“Sunday School class”

“The suggestion was made to begin with a life group [SS class] which we did.”

“I learned a great deal about the life of the church.”

“It seems that we are still getting our ‘feet wet’ but enjoyed the New Member Class immensely and it made us [feel] welcomed and informed.”

2. The new member orientation provided information regarding serving opportunities.

“More open to ways to service and help where most needed.”

“Showed us various opportunities to serve within the church and outside.”

“Encouraged to participate in giving time in areas of interest.”

3. The new member orientation fostered a sense of community among participants.

“I felt more like a part of the church and understood (and appreciated) the membership.”

“Now have a core of people we know since becoming known by the pastors as we get more involved.”

“Enjoyed meeting the people and felt I would enjoy getting to know some of them better by joining more.”

“Introduced the groups – explained – attractive to be in a more intimate setting – families just like us. And with children the same age. This has helped our child look forward to going to church and events, participation.”

4. Respondents offered an assessment about FPC and the New Member Weekend itself.

“Really see the need to expand facility and begin greater outreach to downtown and the next circle around the city.”

“I sensed that FPC is a Bible focused and spiritual church. Attending the NMO substantiated the discipline and obedience to God’s Word as the focus of FPC. We were then eager to join.”

“I thought the entire process was well organized, flowed well, was informative

and fun. I imagined it to be more of a time commitment than it really was (I always thought it was the entire weekend.)”

5. One individual utilized this space to share a short history of their previous church involvement.

“We had been very involved our whole married lives in our Caldwell church. My husband and I served as deacons, then elders for years. I have taught Sunday school since I was 14. I was the Director of Christian Education for 9 years. We both ushered, were part of a ‘Mariner’s’ group; went on two mission trips and were Jr./Sr. high advisors as a young couple. I was also part of a young mother’s Bible study group.”

What other comments would you like to share  
with regards to the joining and assimilation process?

At the end of the survey, participants were invited to offer their general comments with regards to the entire joining and assimilation process. Twenty-one participants or 87.5%, took advantage of this space to offer feedback. Of 21 responses, 20 offered positive remarks concerning both the New Member Weekend and/or their experience in the joining and assimilation process. One member used this opportunity to inform the church that she found another church closer to her home. Only two participants offered specific suggestions for improvement.<sup>5</sup> However, none of the responses offered negative feedback. Examples of the comments received were, “Excellent and personable,” “I like the length and how in-depth the weekend was,” and “The joining process was easy because of the New Member Orientation.” Responses reveal participants most appreciated the new member orientation for the information they received, as a source of encouragement to engage in ministries inside and outside of the church, and as a way to

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5. One participant suggested the idea to add a church tour to the orientation weekend. A second participant shared an example from their previous church to gather new members together for a meal after six months.

foster a sense of community among participants. In summary, the majority of responses were positive and affirming of the orientation and process itself.

### **Key Findings from Anonymous Survey**

#### **The Effectiveness of the Survey**

The survey, simply worded and open-ended, served my purpose of receiving feedback on how well the new member orientation influenced engagement into at least one area of ministry. Based strictly on participant's responses, the project was successful as 91.6% of survey respondents indicated their involvement with one or more areas of ministry. However, the small number of completed surveys relative to the selected sample makes it very difficult to gauge the true effectiveness of the new member orientation as a launch into discipleship.

#### **Participants' Responses**

As mentioned above, the most common words used to describe the weekend, and the new member process as a whole, were "informational," "encouraging," and the understanding that it fostered a sense of community. As helpful as it is to read individual comments, I found it more significant to note what was not mentioned. For example, despite the emphasis on discipleship throughout the new member weekend, the word "disciple," "discipleship," or "gospel" was not mentioned by any of the survey respondents. Neither was the part of the process to complete a faith story or develop an intentional plan of discipleship. Most surprisingly, only one participant mentioned their one-on-one meeting with an elder or deacon. Looking back, it would have been much

more effective to gather new members together in a focus group setting and ask specific questions relating to discipleship and their experience in engaging in ministry following the orientation.

### **Membership Data and Attendance**

The second method of research used to test my hypothesis is discipleship data and worship attendance for the selected sample of 2018 new members. This information was obtained from the church's database six months after each member joined.<sup>6</sup> The research reveals that 90 members, or 71% of the selected sample, were connected to at least one area of discipleship within six months of joining the church. The report also shows that 38 new members, or 30% of the selected sample, were engaged in two or more areas of ministry and/or areas of discipleship. Results are further categorized numerically in Table 5 below.

Table 5. Participation for 2018 New Members

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	#	%
Sunday Life Group	50	39
Serving in Some Capacity	19	15
Missional Community	18	14
Weekly Bible Study	16	12.5
Choir, Orchestra, Praise Team	12	9
Leadership Training	4	3
No Engagement	38	30

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6. A summary table can be found in Appendix D.

### Key Observations from Membership Data

Sunday Life Groups, formerly known as “Sunday school,” remain the most common vehicle of discipleship for new members in the selected sample. Research reveals that 50 people, or 39% of the selected sample, joined a Sunday Life Group within six months of joining the church. For decades, Sunday Life Groups have been the primary method of discipleship at FPC. There are 21 adult classes that range in age from 20 to 95 and above. The majority of these classes were built on an education, or delivery, model of ministry. This means members come to receive a lesson that is prepared and presented by a lay leader or group of leaders. While class members gather for Bible study, share prayer requests, and may participate in an occasional mission project, most have limited interaction with one another outside of Sunday’s gathering. Despite negative national trends on Sunday school growth and attendance, research below shows that Sunday Life Groups at FPC remain a viable vehicle of connection for new members in all age groups.<sup>7</sup> See Table 6 below.

Table 6. 2018 New Member Sunday Life Group Participation by Age

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Age	#	%
≤ 25	6	12
26-45	13	26
46-65	11	22
66-75	12	24
76 +	8	16
	50	100

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7. Carey Nieuwhof, “10 Reasons Even Committed Church Leaders are Attending Less Often,” accessed October 26, 2019, <https://careynieuwhof.com/10-reasons-even-committed-church-attenders-attending-less-often/>.

The second highest area of new member engagement was service. The research reveals that 19 adults, or 15% of the selected sample, were connected to serving in some capacity within six months after joining. Of these 19 new members, 79%, or 15 people, were also engaged in either a Sunday Life Group or missional community. Similar to the anonymous survey results as reported above, Children's Ministry and Hollis Academy were among the top areas of service chosen by new members. Representatives from Children's Ministry and Hollis Academy were present throughout the new member orientations, which most likely influenced these results.

The data also reveals that Missional Communities, as a vehicle of discipleship, are on the rise. The most promising results found in this research are related to Missional Communities. Following the patterns of the early church, Missional Communities are groups of 20-40 people in size that gather regularly as an extended family to learn how to live as disciples of Jesus. Similar to Sunday Life Groups, members in a Missional Community meet for fellowship, prayer, and service, but the focus of their time together is less about learning information and more about building relationships of accountability that help one another apply the gospel in all areas of life. As Missional Communities grow, they are designed to multiply, which makes them different from a typical small group or Sunday Life Group. The report reveals that 18 new members, or 14% of the selected sample, joined a Missional Community within six months of joining the church. The research further reveals that six new members joined a Missional Community prior to attending the new member orientation. As existing groups multiply and new Missional Communities are formed, more opportunities to engage new members in genuine life on life discipleship will exist.

Lack of engagement is an issue. Not every new member within the selected sample responded to the invitation and strong encouragement to engage in some form of discipleship. Within six months of joining, 38 new members, or 30%, were not involved in any area of discipleship or ministry engagement outside of attending weekly worship. Research reveals that worship attendance for this group of new members was comparable to those who were involved in one or more areas of discipleship.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, the project was limited. For comparison purposes, it would have been helpful to have attendance information for each of the above areas of participation, however this information was not available.

### **Worship Attendance**

One of the central arguments throughout my thesis-project has been that disciples are formed in the integrative pattern of connecting people to God (Up), to one another (In), and to the world (Out).<sup>9</sup> While worship attendance alone is not a primary indicator of discipleship formation, there is a relationship between worship and discipleship. For this reason, my research includes worship attendance for the selected sample over a six-month period.<sup>10</sup> Specifically, I was interested in observing the worship patterns of new members in the selected sample and note any correlation to their discipleship engagement. The table below shows the worship frequency for all 127 members over a six-month period.

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8. See Appendix D,

9. Mike Breen, *Building a Discipling Culture* (Pawley's Island, SC: 3 Dimension Ministries, 2016), 92.

10. See Appendix D.

Table 7. Worship Frequency for 2018 New Members

Worship Frequency %	#	%
≥ 75%	29	23
74 – 50%	43	34
49 – 25%	39	31
< 25%	16	12
TOTAL:	128	100

### Key Observations from Worship Attendance

Favorable Worship Attendance is favorable. Twenty-nine new members, or 23%, worshiped 75% or more during the six-month period. Additionally, 72 new members, or 57% of the selected sample, worshiped 50% or more during this same period. While worship attendance for the entire congregation during this same time period is not available for direct comparison, these results reveal that a majority of new members are establishing a regular rhythm of corporate worship.

The Relationship between Worship Attendance and Discipleship Participation  
Research reveals there is a strong relationship between the frequency of worship attendance and discipleship engagement for new members in the selected sample. Eighty-three percent of new members that worshiped 75% or more over six months were engaged in at least one area of discipleship. Additionally, 56% of new members that worshiped at a frequency of 50% or greater were engaged in at least one area of discipleship. As reported in the membership data above, 38 new members, or 30% of the selected sample, were not involved in any area of discipleship community outside of attending Sunday worship.



## Worship Attendance by Age Demographics

Table 8 below reveals that average worship attendance by age groups was fairly consistent over the first six months of membership.

Table 8. Worship Attendance by Age of 2018 New Members

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#	Age	Worship Average
25	18 -29	46%
33	30 -49	50%
30	50 -64	61%
40	65+	65%

An October 2017 article, entitled “6 Important Church Attendance Statistics and What They Tell Us” cites a comprehensive study on worship frequency by age group over a prolonged period.<sup>11</sup> Their research reveals a significant drop in worship attendance for millennials, those born between 1988 and 1999, and a significant rise in the “religious nones category” among all age groups during this same time period.<sup>12</sup> While Sunday morning attendance and engagement is waning in evangelical congregations across North America, FPC may be slow to experience these negative trends locally.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this project has been to design a new member orientation and study its impact on encouraging a life of discipleship. Was the project successful in achieving its main objective? The answer to this question is both “yes” and “no.” On one

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11. Jayson Bradley, “6 Important Church Attendance Statistics and What They Tell Us,” October 23, 2017, accessed October 26, 2019, <https://pushpay.com/blog/church-attendance/>.

12. Religious Nones are those claiming no religious affiliation.

hand, the project revealed that 70% of new members were connected to at least one area of ministry following the revised new member orientation. This is great news.

Additionally, the research reveals there is a strong correlation between new member discipleship engagement and worship attendance. Both of these statistics are worthy of celebration. However, the fact remains, most vehicles of discipleship offered at FPC still operate on the educational model of ministry and do not equip members to engage in gospel-driven relationships inside and outside of church walls. Reorienting the new member process around discipleship is only the beginning. Without further change, the revised new member orientation could actually become a tool for the “attractional” church.

Reclaiming the church’s central role in disciple-making is a monumental task, and our congregation is still in the early stages of learning how to create a discipleship culture. The first step has been to recognize the old process to orient new members was not making disciples. Yes, a new member orientation built around discipleship is a significant improvement over the former “attractional” model, but it still assumes prospective new members “come to us.” While FPC may not be experiencing the same negative worship trends in worship attendance and discipleship engagement as other parts of the country, we cannot count on these trends to continue indefinitely. If cultivating a discipleship culture is what we are fighting for, I believe we must focus on the following three areas: leadership development, intentional discipleship, and cultivating gospel-centered community.

## Leadership Development

“As the leader goes, so goes the culture.”<sup>13</sup> As we move forward in seeking to build a disciple-making culture, re-envisioning leadership through a discipleship lens will be paramount. For the last several decades, FPC’s senior leadership has operated with a strong institutional focus and created job descriptions for leaders that support a corporate culture. Effectiveness is measured in quantifiable, task-related terms, such as worship attendance on Sunday morning, successful stewardship campaigns, and the number of programs or events offered in a given year.

In a disciple-making culture, leadership is oriented around a different set of goals. Leaders recognize the greatest asset they bring to any group of people they serve is their own growing relationship with Christ.<sup>14</sup> Disciple-making leaders are not only held accountable for the committees they run and the tasks they achieve, but also for the disciple-making leaders they raise up. They understand their primary role is leading others in gospel-centered community towards being a disciple-maker. However, a paradox exists: a person cannot lead others in discipleship if they themselves have never been discipled. I believe the priority is to disciple a core group of called, dedicated, mature leaders in one-on-one relationships. As individual leaders are invited into personal relationships of accountability, and adopt lifestyles of intentional discipleship, the leadership culture should slowly begin to change. A leader’s focus will move from seeking church growth to desiring gospel growth, from running programs and committees

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13. Simon Sinek, Facebook post, August 8, 2018, accessed October 26, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/simonsinek/posts/so-goes-the-leader-so-goes-the-culture-so-goes-the-culture-so-goes-the-company-h/10156589095691499/>.

14. Ruth Haley Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership: Seeking God in the Crucible of Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 19.

to learning how to lead others in gospel-centered community.

These kinds of changes are difficult to make and take a lot of time. They will require sacrifice, a teachable heart, and a willingness to let go of old markers of success. Instead of relying on programs to disciple the congregation, leaders in a disciple-making culture measure and celebrate a different standard of measurement: the number of people engaged in disciple-making relationships. A small number of leaders and staff are currently in discipling relationships and are catching the vision. As momentum grows and more leaders become disciple-makers, their influence will bring meaningful change to the leadership culture of our church.

### **Intentional Discipleship: Growing Disciples from the Ground Up**

In order for a discipleship culture to thrive at FPC, a second important initiative is intentional discipleship. We cannot only rely on current leadership and staff to multiply leaders. This is because intentional discipleship is not primarily a “top down” process but by God’s design, organically grows from the “ground up.” Every disciple is called to be a disciple-maker.<sup>15</sup> This is where the revised new member orientation comes into play. As new members learn what it means to be a disciple and engage in gospel-centered community, those who are hungry to grow deeper in discipleship will emerge. For the pattern of multiplication to work, there must be a steady flow of “disciple-makers” ready to engage in one-on-one mentoring relationships within gospel-centered community.

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15. Woodward and White, *The Church as Movement*, 19.

## **Cultivating Gospel-Centered Community**

Finally, for a disciple-making culture to thrive at FPC, a radical reevaluation of each area of our current discipleship is needed. While this project has shown Sunday Life Groups remain a viable point of connection for new members of all ages, most function primarily as an educational model of ministry. There are, however, a few new groups that have formed around a discipleship model. Following the Missional Community model, these groups are typically smaller in number and meet with intentional discipleship and disciple-making as their focus. In addition to meeting on Sunday, they plan times of fellowship and serving together, and seek to build accountability by encouraging one another to apply the gospel to each area of life. As leaders form new Sunday Life Groups around the equipping model of ministry, we will increase our capacity to connect members to genuine life on life discipleship.

In summary, what will it look like when members of FPC are living out their calling to be a disciple-making church? How will we know when FPC has made the transition from “doing” church to “being” the church? What practical signs will be obvious to leadership and lay members alike? When being a church member is synonymous with being a disciple-maker and engaging with gospel-centered community is the norm. When all leaders are equippers of disciples, and all members are given a path to become a leader. When church members no longer gather in corporate worship only expecting to receive but see worship and discipleship as the integrative pattern that equips and sends them out on mission where they work, live, and play. In each scenario above, as each of these things happen, the church will have successfully transformed from “come to us” to a people living on mission. For Jesus charged, “Go, make disciples

of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of age.”<sup>16</sup>

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16. Matthew 28:16-20.

## APPENDIX A

### MEMBERSHIP STATISTICS REPORT

First Presbyterian Church Greenville, SC

Year Ending	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
<b>PREVIOUS TOTAL MEMBERSHIP</b>	4289	4373	4400	4481	4388	3923	3746	3700	3671
+ Gains	225	176	184	100	123	135	182	210	217
Sub Total	4514	4549	4584	4577	4511	4058	3928	3910	3888
- Losses	(141)	(149)	(103)	(193)	(588)	(312)	(228)	(239)	(312)
<b>CURRENT ACTIVE MEMBERSHIP</b>	4373	4400	4481	4388	3923	3746	3700	3671	3576
	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>
<b>PREVIOUS TOTAL MEMBERSHIP</b>	3576	3508	3385	3150	3117	3222	3154	2673	2643
+ Gains	114	152	199	152	179	137	172	144	128
Sub Total	3690	3660	3584	3302	3296	3359	3326	2817	2771
- Losses	(182)	(275)	(434)	(185)	(74)	(205)	(653)	(174)	(68)
<b>CURRENT ACTIVE MEMBERSHIP</b>	3508	3385	3150	3117	3222	3154	2673	2643	2703

**Total Gain in Membership from 2001 to 2018 = 2741**

**38.1% decrease in overall membership**

## APPENDIX B

### TAG CONSULTING EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



#### Discovery Report

## 2.0 Executive Summary

This Executive Summary is divided into three sections:

### What's Going Well?

- Commitment to Biblical Teaching & Preaching
- Buildings/Facilities
- Worship Services
- Friendly & Welcoming People
- Ministry to Children
- Implementation (Staff Effectiveness)
- Active Local Engagement

### Identified Challenges and Concerns

- Aging Congregation/Difficulty Reaching Younger Adults
- Connection Difficulties
- Staff Dependence

### The Central Issue

- Consumerism: Mission-Based vs. Interest-Based
- Your Backyard Opportunities

*\*Please note that throughout this report, we show specific statements from the Transforming Church Index (TCI) with a "%". This refers to percentile. In other words, a 78% means that the church rated itself above 78% of other churches – and below 22% of other churches in the database*

Before attempting to provide a framework for the challenges faced, it is important to understand what is going well at First Presbyterian. The church has a talented leadership group (Staff and Lay) and very capable people. FPCG has a strong history and foundation on which to build!

## What's Going Well?

### Commitment to Biblical Teaching & Preaching

Perhaps the most beloved aspect of FPC is the historically strong, biblical teaching from Sunday School classes to the Sunday morning sermons. Many participants shared a great appreciation for Richard's teaching and the continued commitment to Scripture as the authoritative Word of God. In addition to Richard, focus group members noted that other pastors were also good preachers. Most specifically, people mentioned Phil and Pam. Here are a few relevant comments:

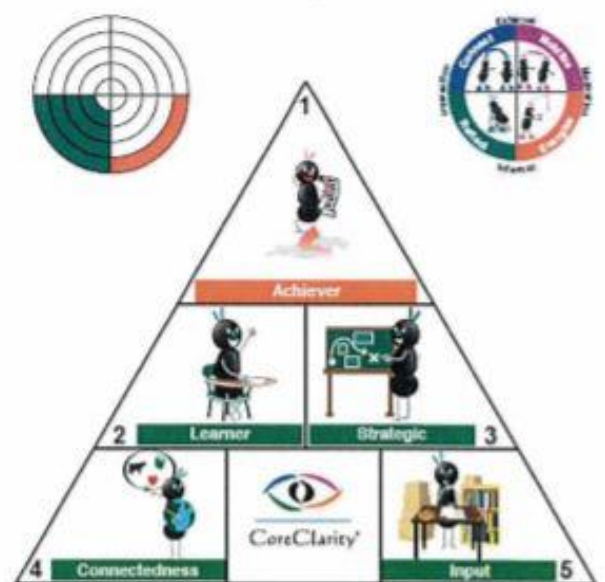
- Great teaching church!



- Rock solid teaching (youth, children and adults). Theologically sound.
- Richard challenges and encourages us!
- Our teaching is all Scripture based – not just one or two verses read in the midst of an entire sermon.
- Richard is well prepared in preaching – great credibility. He has a heart so that we get it and know the Lord and His truth.
- I love my adult Sunday school class (Tom Preston is a great teacher).
- Strong, consistent teaching in the Sunday school.
- I love the teaching in the sermons. We focus on teaching the Scriptures. (others agreed).
- Phil Hargrove is a great teacher. Pam is a good teacher.
- The Sunday school teaching is always deep and very good. Great teachers in this church.
- The skill of the ministers. Richard is an amazing preacher – great delivery and passionate. He is knowledgeable and is able to explain it. The other ministers are good also.
- I'm challenged to be more Christ like by Richard's message.
- This is the best preaching I've encountered in my life (Richard, Pam, Stan and Phil).

According to the Transforming Church Index, the Learning scale is FPC's number one strength. Consider these percentile ranks (% = Percentile Ranking, where FPC compared to other churches in the database) from the TCI:

- My knowledge of the Bible is growing as a result of attending this church – 97%
- Our church effectively teaches the core elements of our faith – 92%
- My understanding of faith has grown through our church's educational programs – 91%
- Our church provides excellent education for adults – 85%
- The Christian education I have received has prepared me well to minister to others – 83%
- Our church's Christian education has made a significant difference in my life – 86%



We had the Directors and Pastors participate in our Prevailing Talents assessment (see graphic, based on the Clifton StrengthsFinder), it is not surprising that 4 of the top 5 team talents (Directors and Pastors) involve gathering and reflecting on information (see section 3.0 Prevailing Talents Team Profile for more detail) – with the "Learner" theme

as the leadership team's number 2 talent. While we provide more detail in section 3, this is a good place to take a look at the top five talents of your Directors and Pastors in more detail:

With **ACHIEVER** as the team's Signature Talent, you are restless, starting every day at zero. A good day is when you begin checking off key tasks and accomplishments. Accomplishment is the underlying energy behind Achiever. You go through the day with a clear set of tasks and goals in mind. You probably keep checklists and definitely have an ongoing checklist in your mind. Your day ends when the checklist is completed - or - when you are exhausted. Achievers have a high level of energy and can work long hours. When you reach your goals you seldom savor the accomplishment because your mind is already moving to the next item on the list. Achiever is sometimes called a short-term Strategic because of the ability to instinctively turn goals into action. They take great satisfaction from being engaged and productive and often make themselves long "to do" lists. For some Achievers if they do something not on their list - they'll add it and check it off. That's a diehard Achiever. It can be hard to turnoff the drive that Achievers have at the end of the day, especially if there remain items on their written or mental checklist that still need to be completed. Some describe a perpetual restlessness and find it hard to simply unplug. Achievers make terrible patients. They need to make a list of the things necessary to recover so they can feel like they are accomplishing something! You may also have a hard time when someone interrupts you in the middle of a task. Achievers like to finish and will find it hard to instantly switch from drive to a full stop. Seven of the thirteen participants have Achiever in their top 5. Achiever is also Richard's individual Signature talent!

With **LEARNER** as the second top talent (54%), the staff team is stimulated by new thoughts and new ideas. They prefer short projects in new areas and may get bored easily and will look for continual mental stimulation. Learners are a sponge for knowledge and love personal growth but are not necessarily interested in becoming a subject matter expert. It is the process of learning that energizes them and it can be about a wide range of topics. This allows them to ramp up quickly on a subject, a client, a meeting or other efforts that require learning. They enjoy new situations and the mental stimulation they provide. The enjoyment of learning is equaled by their enjoyment in sharing and teaching others.

With **STRATEGIC** as the team's third talent (46% of team), members have the ability to look down at the maze from 5,000, or 10,000 feet, find the end point, then back up to discover the five paths that will get them to their final destination. Strategics are great at narrowing options and picking a destination. Because of their quick ability to see the



goal - they think and communicate in headlines while others may need more of the story. Strategic is similar to Achiever. Both instinctively set targets and move toward those targets. Tim Leslie and Brian Stewart lead with Strategic.

With **CONNECTEDNESS** (31%), this team is able to instinctively grasp the big picture. There is a grand plan and pattern behind the chaos—what appears to others as disconnected events. Call it a sixth sense - they see the pattern. They intuitively sense that things happen for a reason. We call it the purpose-finding talent. People and circumstances are part of a bigger plan so you can take the ebb and flow of events with greater flexibility than most. They can harness circumstances as they unfold and do not feel compelled to fight the wave but instead to ride it. This capacity to see purpose in events unfolding also allows them to relate to a wider range of people. They instinctively feel there is a grand scheme that we are all part of. This opens them up to explore options that others easily overlook. That outlook displays itself in how considerate, caring and accepting they are of all kinds of people and circumstances. They also have an uncanny ability to see connections between disparate things. Those with Connectedness can build bridges for people of different cultures or different perspectives like few others. Stan Johnson leads with Connectedness.

With **INPUT** as the overall final top 5 talent, the team has an unbelievably wide bandwidth for accumulating information. This “reflect” talent describes a team that enjoys researching topics in-depth that lead to new sources of inspiration. Ultimately, this team is able to combine this voracious appetite for information with a desire to share it with others so that those they are in community with are moved to action.

Richard also has four “thinking” and “learning” talents in his top 5. Staff leadership is clearly operating in these strengths!

Finally, it is also clear that there is significant theological alignment within the church community. This is a strong foundation from which the church can launch to accomplish its mission

### **Buildings / Facilities**

The church buildings and facilities are a great asset to the church members and to the local community. Not only are the facilities attractive and well maintained, they are also practical. The church is well organized in terms of classroom and gathering space to serve her people. Further, the location is highly visible to the community. In addition to positive comments from the focus groups, the TCI Building scores ranked as the church's #3 strength:

- Our buildings and property are visually appealing from the outside – 86%

- Because of our location, newcomers can easily find our church – 81%
- Our church's buildings are highly visible to people in the community – 86%
- Our worship services are better because of our facilities – 77%
- Our education programs are better because of our facilities – 71%

There are two exceptions supported by both the TCI and focus group comments: the facilities do not serve the needs of the children's ministry as effectively as other ministries and the facilities do not promote "mingling and fellowship."

### Worship Services

The corporate worship services at FPC are given high marks by many and are considered a strength of the church. "Worship" scored second highest out of 15 scales on the TCI. There's a collective appreciation that the services are well planned and orchestrated. Members are grateful to have the choice between a traditional and a contemporary service. Here are a few comments from focus group participants:

- The worship experience is done well. Music, preaching, rituals they are consistent.
- I like that we have two different styles of worship – it helps us reach more people in the community.
- I like that we have the contemporary option. My family/kids love it. It is very relational/laid back and friendly. The music is fantastic. I believe it is a source of growth.
- I love the contemporary worship music – it is phenomenal. John does a great job (another agreed).
- I like that we have 2 styles of services – traditional and contemporary.

TCI rankings also supported the focus group comments:

- I feel inspired by our church's worship services – 86%
- Our minister's sermons draw people to this church – 77%
- I'm growing deeper in my relationship with God through our services – 74%
- I can enthusiastically recommend our worship service to friends outside the church – 83%

### Friendly & Welcoming People

Focus groups participants mentioned how much they love the people of FPC, but this strength may be limited to a relatively small group of people. Here are some of those comments:

- I love the people. They are warm, caring and supportive.
- The people. They are friendly, loving and I know they care for me. If I have needs or prayer concerns they have my back (most agreed).
- The congregation is friendly. I did not feel like a stranger (note: one disagreed saying they came for 1 year before anyone said "hello, how are you?")
- The people are friendly and welcoming.

- It's home for me. Most of my close friends were formed here and in our Sunday school class (another agreed).

It should be noted that the TCI scores regarding relationships did *not* score high. Here are a few of those to consider:

- My church is warm – 32%
- My church is family – 46%
- My church is loving – 24%
- My church is relational – 45%
- My church is friendly – 26%

Perhaps the discrepancy between focus group comments and the TCI scores is due to the deep connection that those invited to the focus groups have with the church and each other. Some participants described difficulty connecting to small groups and Sunday School classes. They felt that many of the groups were *unofficially* “closed” to new people. Consider these comments:

- I've spoken to people who say they did not feel welcomed at the Traditional service.
- I think it is tough to break into a Sunday school class. They tend to be closed feeling. I've heard from some that they had a hard time finding a Sunday school.
- I've heard over and over from people and they said no one spoke to them and even said hello. They said they walked into Christ Church and said the place was so warm. I've heard it from others.

It will be important, moving forward, for the church to continually encourage members to purposefully connect with and invite into relationship those that are new to the church community!

### Ministry to Children

The Children's Ministry is well regarded at FPC. In fact, the “Families” scale scored fourth highest of all 15 scales on the Transforming Church Index at the 66<sup>th</sup> percentile. A positive reputation as well as historical success solidifies this perception of the program within the congregation. Here are a few focus group comments:

- My wife and I love the children's ministry and children's ministry staff. They are great (others agreed).
- I think our children's ministry is good. The teaching at a young age is great!
- We have an incredible staff: from Children's ministry to the security guard.
- My child is loved by the staff. My son enjoyed the preschool (almost all agreed).
- Karen King – she is amazing in Children's ministry. She lives a Christ like life (another agreed). Austin, Evelyn and Karen give so much.

TCI scores:



- Our church provides excellent Christian education for children – 77%
- This church effectively meets the needs of children – 63%

Quite a few participants mentioned that the Children's ministry is not as high a priority as it once was (and should be) and that the staff is significantly overstretched.

#### Implementation (Staff Effectiveness)

Overall, the staff is well regarded and believed to be effective in ministry. The top Prevailing Talent for the Directors and Pastors is "Achiever." This talent is characterized by the ability to get a lot done and a passion to always do more! Seven of the thirteen Pastors/Directors have this talent in their top 5.

Here are the implementation scores from the TCI:

- New information is effectively communicated to a large number of church members – 90%
- Our pastors and leaders do an excellent job of communicating expectations to members – 92%
- This church makes effective use of various communication methods (bulletins, newsletters, telephone, e-mail) – 76%
- Our church effectively meets goals (deadlines, results and budgets) – 89%

It should also be mentioned that the vast majority of participants believed the church leadership navigated the PC(USA) issues with integrity and conviction. The church should be encouraged by how well this challenging situation was handled!

#### Active Local Engagement

It is clear that the members see the church as actively reaching out into the local community. The TCI Outreach scores were high:

- Our local community (neighborhood) knows what our church stands for – 90%
- Our ministries and programs reflect the felt needs of our community – 77%
- Our church strives to make a difference in people's lives outside of our own church – 71%
- If our church were to close down, our contribution to the community would be sorely missed – 85%

However, here are some of the focus group responses to the question: "What would the local community say if asked about First Presbyterian Church?":

- Rich, white church
- Conservative
- Old, formal.
- Our work with Hollis
- Attorneys, Doctors and the "movers and shakers" of Greenville go there
- "I wouldn't fit there" (too affluent and traditional)

- The building and architecture
- Well educated, Caucasian people (not diverse)
- Don't like gay people
- Southern, wealthy "old" Greenville
- The location
- Preschool
- Grains of Grace

Only a small percentage speculated that the surrounding community would know the church for its generosity and community engagement. While the church's work at Hollis Academy is to be commended, most felt the church was known primarily as wealthy, white, powerful and very traditional/conservative.

## Identified Challenges and Concerns

### Aging Congregation/Difficulty Reaching Younger Adults

While very few participants showed concern over the aging congregation, it is important to note that only 14% of TCI respondents identified themselves as 40 years old and younger. Further, only 16% of TCI respondents have been at the church for less than 5 years (56% have been at the church for more than 10 years)! As length of involvement and the average age of an organization's members increases, change initiatives become more difficult to pursue. Consider that, "Changes are readily embraced by our congregation" scored a raw score of 3.1 (just slightly over a neutral response) with a very significant 28% of respondents disagreeing with the statement. Consider these comments that may point to a general resistance to change:

- We were late in adding a contemporary service – most of my friends have been worshipping at a contemporary service years before we started ours.
- If someone donated a chair then you can't take it out of the room it's in. We have an entire room (Heritage Room) that isn't really utilized because it holds old things from our past.
- I dream that we move forward and don't become antiquated. Kids are experiencing a freedom of worship in *other* churches.
- I believe we have some sacred cows.

Connecting younger adults to multi-generational church life is often difficult. FPC is not alone in its struggle to connect meaningfully with those post high school and pre-family. Many churches assume that a key initiative or two, (e.g. a new worship service) will suffice, but to be sustainably effective the strategy will need to be robust and holistic in its approach. While participants at FPC have a desire to attract younger adults most did not seem to have a clear sense of the change that is required or the sacrifices necessary to make this a reality. Here are a few of those comments:

- Our college kids or post college don't have a lot here.

- We don't have a ministry for college kids – it is piecemeal. We are losing kids in that age. None of my 3 kids are here and they are following the Lord at other churches.
- We are not keeping college kids the way we should. I know a lot of kids raised up in this church that then went on to another church in the area.

\*It should also be noted that those aged 56+ scored the church significantly higher on the TCI Innovation questions than those younger.

Ministry to young adults requires a paradigm shift. It cannot simply be solved by changing songs or logos. We will discuss how this works more in the context of the retreats.

### Connection Difficulties

From pastors to volunteers there is a frustration that many members and attendees of the church do not serve in any capacity. The comments ranged from issues of motivation to effectiveness of assimilation process. Here are a few of those comments:

- I dream that our church would connect newer people more effectively.
- When I joined I wanted to get involved. I spoke with the appropriate staff person and it took them 2 months to get back to me. I wanted to plug in quickly.
- I expressed a desire to be a part and gave my info and no one called me.
- We don't help people find their niche. The person has to do that on their own.
- The same people who are doing work get called to do more work. We get spread thin. I don't think we have a good way of helping people connect. I think a lot of people drift away because they don't connect in ministry. The same people do all the work.

TCI Rank:

- The church does a good job of helping members identify their gifts and talents – 21%



### Staff Dependence

Overall, the staff at FPCG is well regarded and considered more than competent at their work. Many of the focus group participants expressed gratitude for their pastors and staff. However, connected to the assimilation difficulties, some believe the church relies too heavily on paid staff. Consider these comments:

- We have a lot of people who are willing to write a check but they don't want to serve. Sometimes we'll have youth events and we can't get enough adults to help serve.
- I believe we have a lack of volunteers. I've heard many staff say they have a difficult time getting members to help serve.
- I think we have a country club mentality. We pay staff to get things done.
- I dream that our members are involved in ministry working within their gifts (not just spectators)
- A lot of our members expect to come and be served. Instead of membership participating in the life of the church. Our Pastors are overworked. The members should be doing it.
- We have a lot of people consuming.

A large staff has been made possible by strong giving at FPC. In 2010, Leadership Network did a study of 253 churches with more than 1,000 in weekend worship attendance. The average annual budget (restricted and unrestricted) for churches with similar attendance was 2.22 million dollars—less than half of FPC's budget. It's clear that the church has done a remarkable job of tapping financial resources. While this generosity and sacrifice should be celebrated in many ways, there is evidence that the giving is primarily for internal ministries—ministries that serve the membership.

In its current model, FPC is heavily reliant on staff. The same study found that churches between 1,000-1,999 had, on average, one full time employee for every 71 attendees. First Presbyterian has 46 full time and 8 part time employees—approximately a 1:28 ratio. Given this, it's not surprising that lay involvement is lacking. You'll recall that "The church does a good job of helping members identify their gifts and talents" scored in the 21<sup>st</sup> percentile with 24% negative response.

### The Central Issue

#### Consumerism at FPCG: Mission-Based vs. Interest-Based

Through the Discovery Process, we believe that FPCG is largely a consumer-oriented church. In a church, consumerism is caused by two primary factors: the influence of American culture on our people and the systems and leadership structures within the church that are designed, unintentionally, to support consumerism.

Let's first look at the systems and structures inside the church. The reason connection has been difficult and the church has hired a large staff is because many members would just prefer to pay to have someone else do the ministry. As long as leadership continues to provide the service, people will remain on the sidelines. No one wants to pay for a free lunch.

As mentioned before, many members at FPC are very generous. The level of financial giving at the church is more than double the national norm! However, there is something important that happens when we are involved in hands on ministry instead of just paying for someone else to do it. It is in the messiness of ministering to others where we find the heart of Jesus. This transition will be difficult but it will be worth it!

Let's look at one area of disconnect:

Vision scores:

- Our leaders effectively establish the church's direction, purpose and objectives – 76%
- Our leaders are unified in purpose and direction – 63%

Connection scores:

- I am important around here – 27%
- I am trusted around here – 14%
- There is faith in me around here – 20%
- I can make a difference around here – 14%
- I am valuable around here – 22%

"Each individual member feels connected to the big picture of what the church is trying to accomplish" scored in the 29<sup>th</sup> percentile, with a 30% negative response and a raw score of less than 3 out of 5.

So, why the disconnect? It seems leadership has clearly defined a vision. Why are the people disconnected from it? During this process TAG discovered one of the systemic reasons for the lack of member engagement with and ownership in the vision. Consider these comments:

- When we see something that needs to change -- the communication doesn't happen. From me to my boss to the staff committee the communication doesn't happen. We often don't hear back from our expressed concerns -- the people in the trenches aren't being heard!

- I felt like at the officer nominating committee the rules were made up and the *freedom to discuss was squashed*. That concerns me greatly (another participant says they have heard this from other sources). It felt like the process was too controlled.
- I think sometimes our staff is too powerful (others understand that there is a difficult balance between all that has to be done).

FPC's operating norms and processes have likely created greater efficiency and focus but have also had an unintended consequence: passivity among the people. When the flow of information is controlled too tightly and robust disagreement and discussion is curtailed the stakeholders disengage. When stakeholders disengage, because they don't believe they can make a difference, they become passive partakers of whatever is offered. Simply put: they become more of a consumer and less of a contributor.

A transition away from a controlled, autocratic operation will cause pain. Efficiency will suffer and people will be disappointed, perhaps even angry. The benefit will be greater personal and corporate ownership in the mission—leading to a greater percentage of people willing to commit their time, energy and financial resources to *grow faithful Christians*.

But consumerism isn't entirely to blame on a church's leadership systems and structures. It also has emerged as a phenomenon in American culture. Consider this excerpt from *Transforming Church* (Kevin Ford, 2008 David C Cook Publishing):

*While foundational to the development of a powerful democracy, our cultural focus on self interest has also contributed to a society filled with individuals who are alienated, lonely, disconnected, and rootless. Even in the way our contemporary architects design the use of space shows how isolated we have become from one another. Americans tend to live in one place, work in another, and socialize in yet another. We have constructed society that encourages retreat. Front porches are a thing of the past. In the suburbs, garage doors open and close, shutting us off from the neighbors. In the cities, planners have HOV lanes to reward the few who actually carpool. The average American house has doubled in size since 1950. Why? Because our private residences have become the primary place where we retreat from society. From the 1950's through the 1990's, we became increasingly fragmented and disconnected from others. Robert Putnam's book, *Bowling Alone* (2000), described this shift: bowling leagues and teams had all but died out in the 1990s. Bowling alleys, as a metaphor for American life, were populated by individuals bowling alone. And churches, which use to*



*be places where people gathered together, became more like grocery stores where people got in and out as quickly as possible. But many sociologists are pointing toward a cultural shift back toward community, the “post” part of the of the modern era’s emphasis on individualism. The American church, however, hasn’t quite made the leap from individualism to community when, in fact, we should be leading the way.*

*Our culture’s obsession with self, perhaps, has granted not only permission but encouragement in the pursuit of consumption. How likely consumers are to consume, in fact, is considered critical to our nation’s well being. The Consumer Confidence Index, which was established in 1985 to measure consumer optimism toward current economic conditions, is closely watched because many economists consider it as an important indicator of the future health of the economy. It has almost become the duty of the American citizen to perform her role as a consumer.*

*So what’s so wrong with that? Aren’t material possessions a sign of blessing, and must we continually denigrate what we should be thankful for? Isn’t it certainly better than living in a country whose citizens routinely die because of starvation and curable diseases? My intention is not to argue the pros and cons of the free market system and the effects of consumerism on our nation – there are plenty of other, and much more informed, books on the subject. Rather, I seek to focus on what happens when the church attempts to import – and again often on subconscious levels – the methodology of consumerism. In the Consumer church, the justification for primarily, or even exclusively, focusing on meeting the needs of the individual is that it will attract people to the church. In some cases, the hope is that those people will then hear the Gospel, and eventually be transformed. And it’s not just a philosophy prominent in the church – it also occurs in much of Christian publishing: the baited hook that draws people in through self interest.*

*In my work as a consultant, I have seen the strategy fail again and again. In fact, I have come to believe that individualism, particularly manifested in consumerism, forms the antithesis of community. In order to understand the consequences of individualism in the church, we first must revisit a biblical theology of what God intends for the church.*

Every organization, no matter the size or mission, must deal with competing values. In the case of FPC, this is fundamentally seen in the role of the member. Does the member serve the mission (missionary, engaged participant, partner) or is the mission to serve the member (consumer, beneficiary, recipient)? As the excerpt above articulates, part of the challenge is that the church has naturally adopted many of the structures and forms of American culture.

**The key transformational question is what should FPCG be: interest-based or mission-based?**

An interest-based organization is like a club, where the members are beneficiaries. They pay dues, volunteer on committees, and receive a benefit. Home-owners associations, country clubs, social clubs, and such are all interest-based organizations. People gather around a common interest (golf, dancing, gardening) in an interest-based organization. The member is the beneficiary.

In contrast, a mission-based organization exists for non-members. Organizations like World Vision, Habitat for Humanity, Samaritan's Purse, Greenpeace, and others all have a mission that is served by the members. The member is the missionary who serves the beneficiary. But the American church has largely functioned as an interest-based organization. This worked when church itself was a common interest. But in an increasingly post-Christian culture, the interest-based church will eventually become irrelevant. FPCG must shift to a mission-based model. The good news is that you have the resources to make this happen. The challenge, however, is the tendency to maintain status quo.

During the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century interest-based organizations—country clubs, social clubs, and other social enclaves—thrived. It is no wonder that churches began to take on some of these characteristics. As long as a church remains an interest-based organization, it will always be a product of the culture in which it operates. Many churches created programs, whether an excellent worship service or exciting youth ministry, that attracted people to the church. The common language in the American church is to describe this as "attractional". The passive, attractional model will no longer work in an increasingly Post-Christian society where, once again, "church" is no longer a common interest.

Out of the approximately 50 focus group participants all but two were Christians before they came to First Presbyterian. One of those participants came to faith at FPC in the 1960's and the other about 10 years ago. It is clear that the church's growth has been primarily from church membership transfers and church shoppers who have moved to Greenville. This should cause concern among the church's leadership. Consider these trends and the future impact on FPC:

1. The U.S. is becoming an increasingly Post-Christian Society. This means that younger people are less likely to search for a faith community (looking for a

common interest) than their parents. Churches that rely on “church shoppers” to find them will not be as successful as in the past. Barna Research Group released this in April 2013:

“Each generation is more post-Christian than the one that came before it. Only 28 percent of seniors (ages 67+) are considered post-Christian, as compared to 35 percent of Boomers (ages 48 to 66), 40 percent of Busters (aka Gen Xers) (ages 29 to 47) and 48 percent of Mosaics (aka Millennials ages 18 to 28).”

2. Those actively searching for a Christian community are less likely than their parents to consider a specific denominational affiliation imperative or even attractive.

Let's unpack what it means to be attractional (interest-based) a little more. Focus group attendees appreciated many excellent and worthy aspects of the church's ministry – from the ministry to children and the high quality of biblical teaching throughout the ministries of the church to the friendly, caring atmosphere. It was evident that worshipping God and learning more about Him was the purpose of these ministries. This is to be celebrated! However, all of these programs are experienced more by members than any outsiders. Additionally, those commenting primarily spoke about being on the receiving end of these quality ministries.

While there is nothing wrong with members wanting to benefit personally from involvement in their church, there needs to be something more that they work towards. Therefore, accomplishing the outreach component of the church's mission – namely, to “cultivate evangelism” and “love and serve others after the example of Christ” – should energize participants! If the unspoken mission of the church is for staff to serve its members, to make them happy, to attract more consumers, then there is no capacity for the members to embrace change. The interest-based organization exists primarily for consumer purposes. Consumerism, as we define it at TAG, is when “consumption exceeds contribution”. The primary beneficiary is the member in an interest-based organization. Therefore, the member has the most at stake when facing change. As a result, the member is resistant to change.

If FPC's members do not thrive on a mission that is external in nature, then the current path is simply unsustainable. There is a subtle and destructive process at work in a consumer-oriented church (even if what is being consumed is spiritual). Without knowing it the church that operates as a provider of spiritual products sets in motion an endless cycle of production that, in the end, cannot be sustained...If the ever-increasing



appetite of the consumer is not met with a corresponding rise in both the quality and quantity of products, what will happen? The church is already heavily staff-dependent, compared to national norms. In addition, the church's giving is significantly higher than national norms, suggesting that congregants may be maxed out in terms of financial contribution to the church.

What happens when member consumption outpaces member contribution?

That is an important question. In an interest-based organization, people will find somewhere else to take their membership if the quality of the products or services suffers. The fear of losing membership triggers the hiring of more staff to keep programs and services at an acceptable level. And an increasingly post-Christian culture is less likely to replace those consumers with others who share a common interest in "church". And the cycle continues.

While the members will resist change, so will the staff. Staff members should generally be hired to support and equip members in their ministry. It seems most members prefer hiring staff to *do* the ministry. But the staff also plays a role in this system. They don't want to make people unhappy. After all, this is their livelihood. So the whole consumer-driven system is designed to resist change.

To be clear: FPC is not entirely consumer-oriented. The reality is far more complicated. In fact, among other initiatives, the church has graciously provided buildings for a local organization that serves families of those with special needs. There is a passion growing among some to impact the people around the church with the gospel. Consider this comment from a focus group participant: "I would like for us to be known for involvement across the street (at Hollis) and impacting those locally. I want more of the people doing the heavy lifting instead of just leaders – that we have member ownership." Notice the "going out" aspect as opposed to calling the community to "come and see how great we are." Notice the distinction between the church leadership/staff and the membership. The challenge in the future for the people of FPC will be to *go* into the local neighborhoods and make disciples of people who do not yet know the Lord. This seems to be your primary mission field. This will likely require a shift in balance from a consumer driven (attractional, serving those already "here" or those theologically similar to us) to a local community model (actively missional). This shift will substantially impact the allocation of resources including time and money.

Given that the natural missional focus is your own backyard, let's take a look at what we learned from our demographic study. This represents a significant opportunity.

FPCG currently finds itself in a slowly growing community. However, that has not always been the case. In the previous two decades, the area was contracting by as much as 7.4% over a ten-year period. The number of households is also increasing and will continue to do so in the foreseeable future. By 2017, an additional 700+ households will be created in the 3-mile radius surrounding FPC. This growth represents a unique opportunity for the church to create relationships with people who are relocating to the area. Generally speaking, new residents are more likely to be open to new relational opportunities. Significant relational investment in the community will pay spiritual dividends for years to come.

The ethnicity of the area will undergo some change but will continue to be represented primarily by Caucasians at more than 54%. Together, by 2017, Caucasian and African-American will still represent more than 80% of the total population. While Asian-Other will see some growth between now and 2017, the most significant statistic is that Hispanic-Latinos will grow by nearly 30%—comprising more than 14% of the population. First Presbyterian would do well to find ways to connect with and encourage the different races that surround the church, possibly through creative children's ministry, inclusive worship and community service projects. The changing demographic landscape is a great opportunity for the church to live missionally instead of protecting the status quo.

This is an older community: it is older than the national average age by 16 months. Currently, Generation X and younger comprise 68% of the population, with the largest future growth expected in Generation Z (those *currently* 10 and under). While the two oldest groupings, Silents and Builders, comprise 13% of the population the greatest need in the future will likely be the needs of young families with children. First Presbyterian may consider ways to connect the generations in ministry and mission to one another!

The significantly lower percentage of two-parent families means that there are more children who are growing up in 1-parent homes. This context allows the church to proactively support and encourage marriages while also seeking restorative activities aimed at struggling marriages within the community. The church may consider equipping healthy couples as mentors for younger married couples. With more than 4,000 homes led by a single parent, the church should consider ways to support,



encourage and minister to those children and parents who often face unique, significant challenges. Perhaps an greater partnership with local schools will allow the church to serve children through after-school tutoring, wellness and athletic programs. Initiatives like these create trusted relationships, giving the church greater opportunities to help children and parents grow spiritually!

The average household income is well below the national average. Interestingly, however, unemployment is more than 2 points lower than the nation as a whole. The lower percentage of basic education has potentially led to the higher percentage of blue-collar workers. It is likely that the 1-parent families are predominately located within 1 mile north, west and south of the church – where we find incomes in the \$14,000-25,000 range. That said, people in your community might be more willing than in others to dialogue honestly about their struggles. Programs such as job training and financial assistance/management are most probably in great need. It's important to remember that more than 20,000 people within 3 miles of your church are not involved in matters of faith at all. That said, the need for a faith-presence in the community has never been greater. This represents a significant opportunity and challenge for the church to identify and meet the "felt needs" of a community. This may require fresh, creative thinking about ministry and how the church measures success.

FPCG should consider ways to engage the surrounding community in mission and ministry through creative partnerships that serve those in need. A strategic partnership could connect the church with the un-churched who have a desire to serve the underprivileged. In addition to financial resources, there is a wealth of human resources that the church as a whole has not been able to engage. Perhaps a partnership with these highly qualified people will release their passions and their talents. Finally, the church should keep in mind that, at 42%, nearly 14,000 blue-collar employees work near the church. These workers often have different work schedules as well as skills than those in white-collar jobs!

Here's the key: the members in a mission-based organization are no longer the primary beneficiaries of the organization's services, but instead the primary means by which the organization accomplishes its mission! And your own backyard is the most logical place for this to occur.

APPENDIX C  
LETTER AND DISCIPLESHIP SURVEY

*Rev. Claire Ripley  
First Presbyterian Church  
200 W. Washington Street  
Greenville, SC 29601*

*Dear New Covenant Partner,*

*It has been some time since you've joined the church, and I am interested in hearing from you! Please take just a moment to answer the enclosed brief survey. In addition to three short questions, a space is provided for your written comments.*

***Please keep in mind: your answers are completely anonymous.*** *Once you are finished, please use the enclosed pre-addressed, stamped envelope to return the survey. It would be most helpful to hear from you as soon as possible.*

*I am looking forward to hearing from each of you! As always, please don't hesitate to reach out if I may answer any questions or help you get connected into the life our wonderful church family. You are a blessing and we're so glad you here!*

*Yours in Christ,*

*Claire*

*Rev. Claire Ripley  
Associate Pastor*

*Dear Friend,*

*Please return this completed page in the self addressed envelope. Thank you!*

Question 1: In what areas of discipleship are you currently engaged?

Question 2: Did attending the New Member Orientation influence this engagement?

Question 3: If so, in what ways?

What other comments would you like to share with regards to the joining and assimilation process?

## APPENDIX D

### WORSHIP AND DISCIPLESHIP ENGAGEMENT DATA

Name	# Worship	%	Area of Discipleship	Date Joined	Age
1	5	20%	None	02/18/18	32
2	5	20%	None	02/18/18	28
3	20	80%	Missional Community	04/29/18	59
4	20	80%	Missional Community	04/29/18	62
5	15	60%	SS Crossroads Sunday School	02/11/18	55
6	25	100%	A/V Staff, Music Ministry	09/23/18	25
7	25	100%	Choir, A/V Volunteer	09/23/18	25
8	6	24%	None	02/11/18	56
9	15	60%	SS Roots Sr. High	02/11/18	19
10	10	40%	Missional Community	02/18/18	44
11	24	96%	Missional Community	02/18/18	50
12	10	40%	Children's Ministry	02/18/18	47
13	10	40%	None	02/18/18	52
14	25	100%	SS Gospel Partners Sunday School Class and Pastor Visitation Ministry	04/29/18	84
15	25	100%	SS Gospel Partners Sunday School Class	04/29/18	81
16	18	72%	SS Journey Sunday School. Children's Ministry	02/11/18	28
17	16	64%	SS Journey Sunday School	02/11/18	34
18	13	52%	Choir	05/12/19	30
19	13	52%	None	09/23/18	29
20	10	40%	None	09/16/18	29
21	10	40%	None	09/16/18	28
22	25	100%	SS Prime Time Sunday School, Children's Ministry	09/23/18	70
23	21	84%	Missional Community, Women's Weekly Bible Study, Children's Ministry	04/29/18	41
24	21	84%	Missional Community	04/29/18	47
25	22	88%	None	04/29/18	78
26	25	100%	SS RN Ward Sunday School, Stephen Minister, Community Bible Study	09/16/18	72
27	23	92%	SS RN Ward Sunday School, Community Bible Study	09/16/18	72
28	17	68%	SS Flock Sunday School Class and Choir	04/29/18	66
29	17	68%	SS Flock Sunday School, Elder Training	04/29/18	67
30	22	88%	Women's Weekly Bible Study and Children's Ministry	09/23/18	46
31	22	88%	Men's Weekly Bible Study and Children's Ministry	09/23/18	41
32	14	56%	None	09/23/18	59
33	14	56%	None	09/23/18	55
34	21	84%	SS Gospel Partners Sunday School Class and Hollis Academy Room Parent	09/16/18	79
35	21	84%	SS Gospel Partners Sunday School Class and Hollis Academy Backpack Ministry	09/16/18	81
36	25	100%	Missional Community	09/16/18	59
37	25	100%	Missional Community	09/16/18	63
38	18	72%	SS Flock Sunday School Class	02/11/18	54
39	18	72%	Choir	02/11/18	54
40	6	24%	None	09/23/18	38
41	6	24%	None	09/23/18	36
42	19	76%	None	02/11/18	75
43	19	76%	Women's Weekly Bible Study	02/11/18	71
44	25	100%	None	02/18/18	71
45	12	48%	None	09/16/18	74
46	21	84%	Hollis Elementary Room Parent	09/23/18	65
47	21	84%	Hollis Elementary Room Parent	09/23/18	67
48	19	76%	None	09/23/18	33
49	19	76%	None	09/23/18	27
50	4	16%	None	02/18/18	62
51	1	0%	None	02/18/18	30
52	6	24%	SS The Gathering Sunday School	04/29/18	29
53	18	72%	None		27
54	18	72%	None		27
55	6	24%	Moved Out of Town	02/18/18	29
56	25	100%	SS Flock Sunday School Class	04/29/18	62
57	25	100%	SS Flock Sunday School Class and Choir	04/29/18	62
58	18	72%	Wit and Wisdom Sr. Adult Ministry	02/11/18	77

Name	# Worship	%	Area of Discipleship	Date Joined	Age
59	18	72%	Wit and Wisdom Sr. Adult Ministry, Women's Weekly Bible Study	02/11/18	78
60	11	44%	SS The Gathering Sunday School	02/18/18	27
61	11	44%	SS Roots Jr. High Mentor	04/29/18	33
62	22	88%	Missional Community	09/16/18	36
63	22	88%	Missional Community, Prayer Ministry	09/16/18	36
64	12	48%	Music, Women's Weekly Bible Study	02/18/18	29
65	25	100%	SS Agape Sunday School	02/11/18	90
66	25	100%	None	02/11/18	72
67	23	92%	SS Journey Sunday School	09/23/18	33
68	23	92%	SS Journey Sunday School. Children's Ministry	09/23/18	33
69	20	80%	None	09/16/18	51
70	20	80%	None	09/16/18	52
71	16	64%	Missional Community and Flock Sunday School	09/16/18	55
72	16	64%	Missional Community and Flock Sunday School	09/16/18	55
73	12	48%	Missional Community	02/11/18	41
74	12	48%	Missional Community	02/11/18	30
75	19	76%	SS Next Steps Sunday School and Prayer Ministry	04/29/18	68
76	6	24%	SS Roots Jr. High, VBS, Day Missions	02/18/18	23
77	20	80%	SS Flock Sunday School Class	02/18/18	53
78	18	72%	SS Next Steps Sunday School	04/29/18	66
79	20	80%	SS Flock Sunday School Class	02/18/18	59
80	12	48%	SS Roots Sr. High	02/18/18	18
81	22	88%	Choir, Women's Weekly Bible Study	05/12/19	53
82	21	84%	Choir, Orchestra	05/12/19	65
83	25	100%	SS Gospel Partners Sunday School Class	02/18/18	84
84	4	16%	SS Journey Sunday School	02/18/18	29
85	25	100%	SS Gospel Partners Sunday School Class	02/18/18	82
86	6	24%	SS The Gathering Sunday School	02/18/18	30
87	2	8%	None	02/11/18	19
88	20	80%	SS Roots Sr. High	02/18/18	17
89	25	100%	Women's Weekly Bible Study	02/18/18	60
90	24	96%	None	02/18/18	58
91	18	72%	Missional Community	09/16/18	60
92	18	72%	Missional Community	09/16/18	65
93	23	92%	SS Upper Room Sunday School	04/29/18	58
94	5	20%	None	05/06/18	31
95	5	20%	SS The Gathering Sunday School	04/29/18	29
96	13	52%	SS The Gathering Sunday School	02/18/18	27
97	20	80%	None	02/11/18	52
98	16	64%	None	02/11/18	49
99	12	48%	None	09/16/18	72
100	12	48%	None	09/16/18	72
101	12	48%	None	04/29/18	81
102	20	80%	None	04/29/18	72
103	20	80%	SS Next Steps Sunday School	09/23/18	58
104	20	80%	SS Roots Jr. High	09/23/18	13
105	20	80%	None	09/23/18	23
106	20	80%	SS Next Steps Sunday School	09/23/18	55
107	22	88%	SS Next Steps Sunday School	09/23/18	75
108	22	88%	SS Next Steps Sunday School	09/23/18	78
109	24	96%	SS Crossroads Sunday School	04/29/18	41
110	24	96%	SS Crossroads Sunday School and Choir	04/29/18	40
111	20	80%	Choir	02/10/19	78
112	20	80%	Choir, Orchestra	04/29/18	
113	25	100%	SS Grace Sunday School	02/18/18	68
114	25	100%	SS Grace Sunday School	02/18/18	67
115	3	12%	None	04/29/18	29
116	18	72%	Women's Weekly Bible Study	09/23/18	37

Name	# Worship	%	Area of Discipleship	Date Joined	Age
117	16	64%	None	09/23/18	47
118	12	48%	None	04/29/18	32
119	12	48%	None	04/29/18	32
120	16	64%	None	09/23/18	40
121	22	88%	None	09/23/18	47
122	21	84%	None	09/23/18	88
123	21	84%	Women's Weekly Bible Study	09/23/18	75
124	19	76%	Women's Weekly Bible Study and Childrens' Ministry	02/18/18	37
125	19	76%	Men's Weekly Bible Study and A/V Volunteer	02/18/18	40
126	25	100%	SS Koinonia Sunday School, Choir	09/16/18	73
127	15	60%	SS Koinonia Sunday School	09/16/18	71
17.1171875		69%			

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